

AN
ARCHDEMON'S
DILEMMA: HOW TO
LOVE YOUR
ELF BRIDE

15

FUMINORI TESHIMA

ILL. COMTA







**"My name
is Valefor!
I am the
Archdemon
in charge
of your
lives!"**

**Foll lorded
over the
Nephilim
with steely
determination.
After that, she
took a deep
breath and
addressed
them all.**

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*The awkward mother
and son have a conversation
over a game of chess.*



The miser of a
sorcerer sat
atop a bridge,
looking down
over the town
when someone
suddenly held
out a pink
flower to
her side.

“My
beautiful lady,
shouldn’t you
better choose
the time
and place to
collect your
treasures?”

“Aha,
could
you not
approach
me so
casually,
Glasya-
Labolas?”



AN ARCHDEMON'S DILEMMA: HOW TO LOVE YOUR ELF BRIDE

Zagan

The protagonist of this series. He was abducted by a sorcerer at a young age, but managed to slaughter said sorcerer and stole all his assets and knowledge. After falling in love with Nephy at first sight and purchasing her, he worries over how to properly convey his feelings to the first person he's ever truly cared for.

Nephy

An elf girl with snow-white hair. Even among the elves, who possessed a high level of mana, hers was extraordinarily high, so she was treated as a cursed child. Little by little, she grows to love Zagan, who told her “he needed her.”

ACT 1



Barbatos

Zagan's undesirable friend. A skilled sorcerer who is one of the leading Archdemon candidates. Is constantly troubled by Chastille's crybaby side, but still can't find it in himself to leave her alone.



Chastille Lillqvist

An Archangel known as the Maiden of the Sacred Sword. She's a master of the blade, but is far too serious and easily tricked. Those around her have begun to suspect she's in a much deeper relationship with her guardian sorcerer, Barbatos, than she lets on, but she vehemently denies it.



Nephteros

A sorcerer who looks extremely similar to Nephy. Her true identity is a homunculus created by Archdemon Bifrons. Since running away from Bifrons, she's taken up residence in the Kianoides church.



Foll

Wise Dragon Orobas's daughter and a current Archdemon. She was adopted by Zagan and Nephy. The two of them heavily dote on her, and she is growing at an astonishing pace.



Alshiera

A girl of the Night Clan who has actually lived for an extremely long time. Calls Zagan the Silver-Eyed King. She has an understanding of history that has been lost to man, but tends to refuse to answer any questions about it for some reason.



Asura

One of the Nephilim created by Shere Khan. He is actually a child soldier from a thousand years ago who fought by Alshiera's side.

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Prologue

“The time has come.”

In the depths of Archdemon Palace, Zagan swung back his mantle and spoke with all the majesty of an Archdemon. His battle with the other dreadful Archdemons, Shere Khan and Bifrons, had come to an end after great difficulty. It was finally time.

“We shall now draw up plans for Nephy’s birthday present!”

Yes. Several days had passed since Zagan’s birthday celebration. Nephy’s birthday was quickly approaching now. There were over forty days until then, to be precise, but he still couldn’t afford to be negligent.

Two men stood in the room. One was Zagan, unable to suppress the tremendous mana building up within him. The other was Archdemon Naberius, who wore a mask and had a large enough frame that Zagan had to look up at him.

“You people...” Naberius said with a groan, his steely muscles quivering. “Haven’t you been using me too much like I’m at your beck and call?”

Archdemon Naberius’s second name was Mystic Artisan. He was the only sorcerer of this age capable of forging mithril. He’d originally come to Zagan for help with saving Archdemon Furas from the nightmare realm, but ever since, Zagan’s group had pushed all sorts of crafting requests onto him.

Zagan shook his head in lament, then thrust out a finger with a snap. “How effeminate, Archdemon Naberius! Do you think I’m the type of man to cut corners when it comes to a present for my bride?!”

“What’s wrong with being effeminate? I’m a maiden at heart,” Naberius protested, a single crimson eye trembling behind his mask. In all respects, his voice was deep and manly.

“Is that so...? Sorry about that,” Zagan said.

I don't really understand, though... Naberius was actually a beholder. His transformation into human form was similar to how Zagan's daughter Foll did it. They didn't imitate someone else's image, but took on the shape of what they would look like were they actually human.

As such, Zagan had been careful not to touch upon his muscular form. In terms of sex, at least, he was completely a man. Zagan couldn't understand why he behaved like a woman. Not that he really cared either way, so he didn't push the topic. It didn't make sense, but it was definitely important to Naberius.

Zagan cocked his head, then got the conversation back on track. "Hmm. I heard Nephy had you make my ring. Was there anything else?"

Zagan wasn't planning on leaving this present entirely to Naberius. He'd come to this man for support and had even prepared recompense. There was no need to criticize Zagan for this. And yet, Naberius's one eye was filled with a reproachful light.

"Didn't you receive a mithril chessboard?" Naberius asked.

"Aah, now that you mention it, yeah," Zagan replied somewhat bitterly.

That had been a present from a certain girl—the vampire Alshiera—Zagan's mother. He had no idea how to come to grips with a parent he'd never known of until recently, though.

"Don't tell me... You made that too?"

"Who else could have?"

There were thirty-two chess pieces in total. What's more, the board itself had also been made of mithril. Each piece was worth as much as an entire castle. As such, it was fair for Naberius to complain about it. Nevertheless, he was on board with Zagan's unreasonable request. That was because Zagan had a grasp of a significant weakness of his.

Naberius had "lost" Shere Khan's Sigil.

The recent battle had been a major enough incident for four Archdemons to be replaced. Zagan's group had secured three of these seats, but the last one—the one Barbatos was meant to inherit—had gone missing.

Naberius had been the one managing the Sigil, so in exchange for Zagan refraining from prodding into specifics, he'd taken on Zagan's request. A present for Zagan's beloved bride simply had enough value to balance that out.

Besides, I'm not clueless about who has that Sigil right now.

"I see," Zagan said, folding his arms. "That chessboard certainly is well-made. That's just how much I value your skills."

He was pleased with the chessboard and used it every night to play a game against Raphael or Foll.

"Hmhm! I rather like that honest side of you," Naberius said, sounding rather pleased.

"Hmph! Everything else about you makes me want to puke," Zagan replied.

The two Archdemons exchanged a stiff handshake, not really getting along at all, then got to work on their collaborative project.

"In any case, Zagan," Naberius suddenly muttered, "if you have precious treasures, then you should at least lock them away in a treasury. It seems you're just tossing everything into subspace, but that detracts from their worth as a collector."

"Hmm, a treasury? I've never thought about it."

It did make sense for him to have one as an Archdemon. He had Nephy's birthday present and the wedding ring he'd yet to give her. There were also the gifts he'd gotten from Foll and all the others, as well as Memorandums of Nephy.

"Archdemon Palace should at least have a treasury already, right?" Naberius said with an exasperated shake of his head.

"It does. The doors are wide open, so anyone can go in," Zagan said indifferently.

"Hwuh?"

That meant anyone was capable of putting their hands on the Eldest's legacy. There were of course reasonable restrictions on taking anything out.

There're a lot of unusual things in there that I have no idea how to use or what they even are.

Zagan had dispatched the majority of his subordinates here to analyze and manage Marchosias's legacy to begin with. It would be detrimental to restrict access.

A sorcerer's true treasure is their recorded knowledge, after all.

The items in the treasury didn't have much worth. Many were actually dangerous to even touch. That was why, if his subordinates so desired, he would grant them said treasures in exchange for ongoing analytical data on them. The empowerment of Zagan's subordinates had a direct link to his own interests, as could be seen in examples like Shax, Leviathan, and Behemoth.

"Well, I suppose the security is still tight. It might not be a bad idea to throw out what's left inside and store my personal effects there."

He'd have to think of a new place to seal away dangerous goods. If he had a room that nobody was allowed to enter, he could even plaster an entire wall with Memorandums of Nephy. It was actually a pretty good idea.

Well, if anyone does see it, I'll have no choice but to kill them.

Naberius put his hand to his brow, holding back the onset of a headache. "Personal effects...? That's not what I—"

"They're my treasures, so they're my personal effects. They have the value to be stored in a treasury."

The terrific idea brought a smile to Zagan's face—with no way of knowing how this misleading suggestion would bring about the troublesome incident to follow.

Chapter I: A Parent-Child Relationship is Bothersome for All Parties

“Yo, Zagan! This old man’s here for a visit.”

“I see. Heaven’s Phosphor Single Petal.”

In Archdemon Palace’s throne room, Zagan let out a sigh and fired a blade of his greatest sorcery. It’d been some time since he’d started working on Nephy’s birthday present. About half a month had passed since things were settled with Shere Khan, but there’d been many failures in making the present, and though it still wasn’t complete, progress was smooth.

Cleaning up after the last battle, however, wasn’t going so smoothly. They’d avoided any physical damage to the town, but the cessation of all traffic for three days had brought on major repercussions. Kianoides thrived on commerce. To put it simply, with no goods flowing in or out, the entire town had ceased functioning. Even just counting the merchants, the damage done was unfathomable.

Zagan had to compensate for such damages and treat all of his injured subordinates and Angelic Knights. They had to tally up all the tools and catalysts consumed by the extensive use of sorcery during the battle, especially for Heaven’s Phosphor Showers of the Wailing Dead. Then there was all the food that was needed and the current state of the emergency stores to consider. What’s more, he even had to decide on what to do with the surviving prisoners of war. There was no end to it all.

Normally, it would be around time for everything to be handled, but they were currently short on hands. Those who’d contributed greatly during the battle had all been given a long vacation in recompense. This included those who usually handled such affairs, like Raphael. Work and relaxation had to be kept in balance. This was especially the case for Raphael. Not only was he made out to be dead, but the fact that he’d killed a cardinal had come to light. Officially, he had to remain hidden.

It was of course up to everyone how they spent their free time. There were a fair number of sorcerers who immersed themselves in their research in Archdemon Palace. This *was* relaxation for them, so he couldn't drag them out to do work. That was why Zagan was stuck holing up in Archdemon Palace instead of his own castle.

I want to go on dates with Nephy and have some tea! I haven't even really seen her lately! And it wasn't just Nephy. His daughter Foll was now an Archdemon and was receiving lessons from Orias and Alshiera, so she was also rarely by his side.

I want to take a relaxing family vacation too! As such, short on hands everywhere and having to work on the cleanup himself, he'd gotten a visit from this carefree geezer. That was why it was reasonable for Zagan to have reflexively fired a killing blow his way.

The old man twisted his body and leaned back, planting a hand against the floor for support, just barely managing to dodge the black flame.

"You just seriously tried to kill me," he grumbled.

"Hmm... It certainly is hard to kill you with a frontal attack. As is to be expected of a former Archdemon, I suppose. Whatever. Just kill yourself for me, then."

Much like Zagan and Kimaris, this man stood at the peak of all sorcerers who specialized in direct confrontation. On the other hand, he'd specialized in it so much that crafty opponents like Shere Khan and Bifrons had easily been able to bring him low.

"You're not even this mean to Purgatory when you beat him black and blue. Why are you so damn harsh with me?"

"Barbatos is an idiot, and trash, and a villain, but he's talented. Unlike you."

A vein popped up on former Archdemon Andrealphus's brow and he trembled in anger. Having heard the uproar, someone threw open the door to the throne room and several people rushed inside.

"Boss! What's going on?"

The first to enter was Shax. He was one of the new Archdemons, but due to his pessimistic nature, he'd refused to take a vacation and had remained as Zagan's advisor. He was even managing the treatment of all the injured. He really was an impressive man.

Well, I guess it's also because Kuroka's on a family vacation with Raphael... Those two were currently in Raziel enjoying some hot springs as a father and daughter. It was unlikely the church would ever imagine that their missing former Archangel was taking a vacation right under their noses.

As for Kuroka, having finally gotten into a relationship with Shax, she was sure to want to spend more time with the sorcerer. But if Raphael's feelings on the matter weren't put in order, Shax was in serious danger of getting killed. As such, this was a necessity.

Besides, after hearing about Raphael's past... Zagan hadn't intended on eavesdropping but had overheard the conversation at the time. Even if they weren't related by blood, Kuroka was Raphael's daughter. Zagan wanted them to cherish the time they had together.

Still in the posture of having dodged Heaven's Phosphor, Andrealphus waved to Shax. "Yo, if it isn't my beloved successor. Mind lending me a li'l hand? Your master is seriously trying to off me here."

"What did you do this time...?" Shax asked with an exasperated sigh.

Andrealphus hummed in admiration, but bent backwards as he was, he had no dignity.

"You've grown awfully calm in the short time I haven't seen you, huh?" he said to Shax. "I guess the little cat lady not being here plays a part in that, though."

"Kurosuke's got nothing to do with it...is what I'd normally say, but if I act indecisive all the time, I won't be able to protect her."

"That's a good look on your mug," Andrealphus said, straightening himself back up.

Judging by his tone, he had business with Shax. Just as Zagan was about to press him for answers, more people came into the room. Rather than hurrying

in because of the commotion, they'd come out of curiosity.

"You're, umm...Andre...raffle?" Foll asked.

Now that Zagan thought of it, Foll had met Andrealphus before, but she'd never really spoken with him. It was understandable for her to barely remember his name. It was his fault for having a hard-to-remember name to begin with.

"So close!" the no-good geezer said with a snap of his fingers. "It's Andrealphus."

Foll nodded meekly, then repeated after him. "Anderafulus?"

"Hm... I guess it's a little hard to pronounce. Then just call me your kind uncle!"

"That's...instinctively unpleasant."

She was clearly put off by the idea. Tears of sorrow pooled in Andrealphus's eyes.

"That's rude, Foll. There are times when your honest opinions can hurt others." Holding up a finger, Nephy gently rebuked her daughter and came into the room. She'd likely been in the middle of studying Celestian. She wasn't wearing her usual maid outfit and was instead clad in a bluish white robe.

She looks so dignified like that! Zagan smacked his chest a few times to calm down.

"I see... I didn't realize. Sorry," Foll said.

"Hang on, little lady. Apologizing like that hurts too," Andrealphus said with quivering lips, desperately holding back his tears.

"Aah, so it's you," an enormous figure with a splendid mane said. "It has been a long time, Sir Andrealphus."

"Sob... You're the only one who treats me like a person here, Kimaris!"

"I don't think that's true... Um, is something the matter?"

Even while deeply moved at being greeted properly, Andrealphus jolted back and began trembling.

“I-It’s nothing. Nothing at all...”

Kimaris’s punch the other day had had quite the effect. This man was supposed to specialize in close combat, but that strike had taken him hours to regain consciousness from. There was no blaming him for that, though.

Well, they say the quiet ones are far scarier when angry...

Zagan at least had room for some sympathy, but seeing how Andrealphus had brought it upon himself, he didn’t say anything.

“Andrealphus?” Gremory said, entering the room in her form as an old woman, having finally recovered from her wounds. “Hmm... Is he actually here? He has so little love power I can’t even spot him...”

She squinted like she was trying to read some very small writing. *She didn’t get cut down by Andrealphus back then because she seriously can’t see him, right...?* In this granny’s case, it wasn’t out of the question. It left Zagan feeling somewhat uneasy.

Just as Zagan figured that was everyone, one more person peeked into the room from the door’s shadow.

“What the hell are you doing there, Alshiera?” he asked.

“It just doesn’t seem like a conversation I need to participate in.”

She averted her eyes coldly, but it was clear she was very conscious of Zagan. Much like him, she had no idea how they should interact.

“If you’re curious, then just come in,” Zagan said with a sigh. “We can’t get started until the door’s shut.”

“.....”

Alshiera still looked hesitant.

“You don’t know when to give up. Just get in here, Alshiera,” Foll said, tugging on her hand.

“Aaugh...”

With that, the doors to the throne room closed.



Gathered in the throne room were Zagan, Andrealphus, and the new Archdemons—Shax, Foll, and Nephy—as well as Kimaris, Gremory, and Alshiera. These were the strongest forces remaining in the palace. In Zagan’s castle, a gathering this large would be a little cramped, but this was nothing for Archdemon Palace.

Oppressive velvet curtains hung behind the throne, the opening between them showing signs of something like a large painting having once been there. It’d already been gone by the time Zagan took the place over, but it had likely been someone’s portrait. The space was rather luxurious compared to Zagan’s castle. This was simply a matter of the previous owner’s tastes. Nobody had bothered changing anything about it since.

I feel like it’s been a while since I got to sit down and have some quiet time with Nephy. Their relationship had at least progressed to the point where they could exchange kisses, but given a short period of separation, this man was one to regress back to the days when they’d just met. Well, she was the same in this regard. Zagan took a fleeting glance her way just as Nephy was doing the same, and their eyes met.

“Heh heh heh...”

The two could only laugh at the situation. Zagan desperately stopped his knees from buckling, while Nephy covered her cheeks as the tips of her pointy ears turned red. Seeing her like this, Foll tugged on her robe.

“Nephy, it looks like we’re gonna have a serious conversation here...” she said.

“Aaugh... I know. I know, okay?” Nephy replied.

“You have it rough, little lady,” Shax muttered sympathetically.

“You should reflect on this too, Shax,” Foll retorted.

“I’m pretty sure I’ve been putting in a lot of work on that front lately!” Shax yelled, daunted by her cold gaze.

“So?” Andrealphus cut back in. “Can we get started yet?”

“Right. You were about to kill yourself,” Zagan answered. “Well, I’ll overlook

some stains on the floor. Get it done already.”

“I’m not killing myself!” Andrealphus yelled between wheezes. “The town for the six hundred surviving Nephilim is ready.”

That was the proposal Andrealphus had made some time ago regarding the Nephilim.

“A town?” Foll asked, her eyes wide. “You made a town for the Nephilim?”

“Damn straight. The majority of that lot are from hundreds of years back, or even a thousand,” Andrealphus said. “The guys from our current age are supposed to be dead too, so we can’t have them wandering all over the place.”

Above all else, they’d been resurrected for the sake of destroying the world. Nobody would look kindly upon Shere Khan’s harbingers of destruction.

Shax nodded. “If they’re gonna live here, we need to fill in that gap in cognition they have between the past and present.”

They also needed the knowledge to survive in the modern world. Even just considering the education they needed in this regard, it was a pretty good idea to make a town for them.

“I’m surprised there are any survivors to begin with, given what happened,” Alshiera commented curiously.

“They’re the ones who couldn’t even regain consciousness using Shere Khan’s puppetry,” Zagan answered. “Specifically, they’re the ones who were so close to dead that puppetry was meaningless.”

Heaven’s Phosphor Showers of the Wailing Dead distinguished its targets based on hostility. This included the hostility of the puppeteer, Shere Khan. There’d been no other way of separating friend from foe on a battlefield where ten thousand bodies had been jumbled together. As such, it hadn’t hit anybody who’d been unconscious at the time.

“There are also those Sir Zagan freed from the puppetry,” Kimaris added.

“Hmph.”

This was one reason Zagan had gone out of his way to diligently punch them one at a time. With each strike, he’d broken the sorcery’s ability to pass

commands. Those who'd had the puppetry undone had surely lost all thoughts of hostility upon witnessing the cruel form of Orobas and the way Foll's group had fought against him.

Well, it doesn't change the fact that I destroyed their bodily functions through force. There'd also been those who'd died from the shock. The lucky ones had survived. Zagan could only scoff at the outcome.

"You have something you want to say?" he asked Alshiera, who looked rather surprised.

"Tee hee hee. I'm simply glad to see that the Silver-Eyed King is still the Silver-Eyed King," she answered, relief and affection in her voice.

It really is hard to handle this... Bewildered by her statement, Zagan turned his eyes back to Andrealphus.

"So? I doubt you came all the way here just to give a damn report. What do you want?"

"That makes things quick," Andrealphus said, smiling bitterly before getting serious. "I want an Archdemon to support them."

Everyone aside from Zagan was shocked by his request.

"Don't they have you?" Shax asked. "You *were* the Head Archdemon."

"*Were* ain't enough. They're basically Shere Khan's refugees, and that asshole went around pissing off the whole world. To top it off, there're a whole lot of rare species among them that're supposed to be extinct. That makes them a big old target for sorcerers."

The very existence of the Nephilim already made them valuable research subjects. After all, they could be considered improved versions of highly prized homunculi.

Zagan nodded in irritation. "What's more, the Angelic Knights can't leave the survivors at large. Even if it was on a small scale, this was the first war with an Archdemon."

The church had deployed three hundred knights in battle. This wasn't much compared to Shere Khan's army, but only one hundred Angelic Knights were

stationed in any single town—150 when including the retired vets and young knights in training Chastille had mustered. Taking this into consideration, it was impressive they'd managed to adapt in a single day. They couldn't afford to neglect the defenses of other towns, after all.

In short, the Nephilim were targets for both sorcerers and Angelic Knights. Andrealphus had lived up to his name—even if he was retired now—by maintaining things up to this point. But now that he was here, it meant he was at his limit. Even then, Zagan didn't agree immediately.

"I understand the circumstances," Kimaris said, his expression grim. "But won't it be difficult to bring them under Sir Zagan's protection?"

"What do you mean?" Foll asked, cocking her head.

"Regardless of the situation," Gremory answered, "the Nephilim see our liege as the sworn enemy who slaughtered many of their brethren. I doubt that lot will obediently accept him as their protector."

"Even though Zagan saved their lives?"

"Think of how annoyed we feel when it comes to this guy," Zagan said, brushing Foll's head and pointing at Andrealphus. "Do you understand now?"

"Aah..."

Everyone in the room, including Andrealphus, nodded in agreement. Andrealphus had taken it upon himself to challenge Shere Khan, ultimately failing and becoming Shere Khan's puppet. This wasn't worthy of praise, of course, but there was no reason to constantly criticize him for it either. Being irritated by the outcome was a different matter, though.

"Hey, why're you nodding along too?" Shax said, coming to his senses.

"I mean, I've been wondering why everyone hates me so much when I've been putting in so much work..." Andrealphus answered.

In any case, this was a problem. Zagan couldn't take them in like he usually did.

Orias is retired now, and she's antisocial to begin with... When it came to her daughters, her heart throbbed hard enough to bring her to the verge of death,

but she was fundamentally a hermit. There was no reason to throw strangers, and six hundred of them at that, under her wing.

Furcas can't pull it off either. As he was now, he was nothing more than a novice sorcerer. Besides, he could turn into an enemy if his memories returned. Entrusting the Nephilim to him could lead to them being used as weapons. Even disregarding that, the boy clung to Lilith's back whenever Selphy glared at him. The thought of leaving anything under his protection made Zagan uneasy.

Naberius...is out of the question. He was cooperating with Zagan now, but that was because they had a "contract." Once that was over, it wouldn't be strange for him to turn on them. What's more, he calmly colluded with the enemy when it didn't affect the contract. He couldn't be trusted.

That leaves... Someone with power and fame. Someone who wouldn't turn against Zagan. Also, someone who had a friendly rapport with the Angelic Knights, or who at least wasn't hostile toward them. Furthermore, they had to be an Archdemon that the Nephilim didn't resent. Did someone so convenient actually exist?

Zagan let out a sigh. This wasn't because nobody came to mind. It was because there was nobody better suited to the task.

Don't cower, Zagan! You made her an Archdemon because you recognized her as an adult!

He then turned his eyes toward the person in question.

"Foll. Do you want to try taking this on?"

The little dragon's eyes shot open. "M-Me?"

"Hmm, I get it," Andrealphus said. "The little lady did protect both the Angelic Knights and the Nephilim during the battle. Being Wise Dragon Orobas's child also gives her an affinity with them. What's more, she's the Archdemon who put on the biggest display of power there. Can't complain with your choice."

He'd likely come here with the intent of picking her from the very beginning. Zagan glared at Andrealphus reproachfully.

"Please wait a moment, Master Zagan," Nephy said in a fluster. "I don't think

Foll will be completely free from the anger of others. We can't possibly allow her to go somewhere so dangerous..."

Zagan nearly backed down because of his beloved bride's plea, but immediately strengthened his spirit and shook his head.

"It's definitely dangerous, but I believe she can do it," Zagan said, then looked directly into his daughter's eyes. "What do you think, Foll? If you don't want to bother, then you are of course free to refuse. Just as Nephy said, it could stir up trouble with the other Archdemons or Angelic Knights."

Nevertheless, Zagan believed Foll was the best candidate. She clenched her fists in front of her chest and thought it over, but she didn't spend all that long worrying about it.

"Got it. I'll give it a try."

"Foll!"



Nephy unintentionally raised her voice but knew she was barking up the wrong tree to blame her daughter for this. Nephy agonized over the thought that this was too early for Foll while also wanting to acknowledge her daughter as being able to stand on her own. Her pointy ears quivered about as she reflected over this inner conflict.

This is the first time I've seen Nephy like this! Zagan's heart pounded at the sight of her expression, and he used all his power as an Archdemon to keep it under control.

"Hnnngh... What love power! It's accumulating even in such a situation?!"

"Miss Gremory, please control yourself."

Gremory shrank back, overawed by what was going on, and Kimaris held her in place.

Before long, Nephy slumped her shoulders in resignation. "Make sure you come back in time for dinner, okay...?"

That was her point of compromise.

Foll strained a smile. "Heh heh. Mm. I'll come back in time."

Nephy stowed the splendid figure of her daughter in her heart and somehow managed a smile of her own.

"Lady Nephy, there's no need for concern," Alshiera said, sidling up to her. "I will remain by Foll's side for a while. The majority of them are my acquaintances."

"P-Please take care of Foll, Lady Alshi—" Nephy shook her head as if suddenly remembering something, then continued with her usual smile. "Please take care of Foll, mother."

Now it was Alshiera's turn to stare wide-eyed in astonishment. She then picked at the hem of her skirt and curtsied.

"Please leave it to me."

Zagan's gaze also wandered about awkwardly, but he eventually nodded.

I can't leave things like this forever. He reluctantly gave in to the thought

when Andrealphus gave him a pleasant smile. It appeared this man also knew Alshiera's identity. Zagan decided to vent his anger at the man and glared at him.

"This sits poorly with me," he said. "You're making a face like all your burdens have been taken from you, Andrealphus."

"Haven't they? I've never been fit for this stuff. Being the Head Archdemon or an Archangel or anything else where I'm in charge of others, I mean."

That was why he'd contented himself with being the number two Archangel. Even had he not lost to Shere Khan, Andrealphus would likely have treated that as his last job and yielded his Sigil to someone else. It was unexpected for that to be Shax, though.

"The Angelic Knight Michael is being treated as KIA," Andrealphus added. "I'd like to move on to retirement already."

"Do as you want...once everything is cleaned up."

"Hah, as harsh as always."

Looking after the Nephilim wasn't a job that would end so easily. Andrealphus smiled bitterly, having taken it on himself, then took out a wooden box to have a smoke.

With that pause in the conversation, Gremory meekly raised her voice.

"Are you done with this topic, then? I have something to speak of too."

"Go have your talks at your weird meetings," Zagan said.

"It's serious!"

The granny treated her "love power" as serious business, so she was utterly untrustworthy on that front. Having said that, it was a king's duty to listen to his subjects. With no other choice, Zagan waited for her next words.

"It's about Shere Khan's past," Gremory started gravely. "We cannot leave the animosity between sorcerers and Angelic Knights be."

Zagan had already received her report regarding Shere Khan's memories. The information had also been shared with everyone in this room. The incident in

question could be said to be the reason behind all of Shere Khan's violence. The late Archdemon's teacher, Lisette Dantalian, had once kept the world in check. Due to Marchosias's betrayal, sorcerers and Angelic Knights had gone down decisively different paths.

Shere Khan had personally settled that score. The one he'd fought—the one known as “Marc”—had been erased from the world. The two had struck each other down. Even if that was an unsatisfying conclusion, it had been Shere Khan's score to settle. It was absurd for Zagan to barge in from the sidelines.

Shere Khan hadn't wished for someone to avenge his death. But as Shere Khan's friend, Zagan wanted to grant the wish those two had failed to see fulfilled.

“Even Chastille and I managed to become friends,” Nephy said with a pained expression. “I'm sure sorcerers and Angelic Knights can live hand in hand.”

Kimaris nodded. “You're right. It might be difficult, but I don't think it's impossible.”

As one of Shere Khan's former friends, Kimaris also wanted to salvage the late Archdemon's dreams. Setting aside whether there was actually a way of achieving it, Kimaris was optimistic.

“I feel the same way,” Shax joined in with a grimace, “but the problem is how to do it. There're Angelic Knights who took up the sword out of hatred toward sorcerers, and sorcerers aren't the type you can really rein in either.”

“Is it really that hard?” Foll asked curiously.

“Well, you might not really get it hanging around here, but the world is pretty complicated,” Andrealphus told her.

“Why? There's a way to do it.”

“Hm...? What do you mean?”

Even Andrealphus's smile faltered at how convinced she was. Foll turned to Zagan, who nodded back to her.

“You're right,” he said. “The ideal uproar just took place. There's no point in leaving it unused.” With that, he turned to Gremory. “You may do whatever the

hell you want. Use my name and whoever and whatever else you need.”

Gremory’s lips and eyes curved into crescent moons. It was as if she’d been given the most spectacular of treasures.

“Kee hee hee! If my liege so commands, then I must devote all my energy to seeing your will done.”

“Cut the shameless act. You planned on this from the very beginning.”

It was clear as day. This granny had acted all meek, but she’d simply wanted Zagan’s permission to make moves on a grand scale. The others finally realized what Gremory was planning. There was a mix of emotions in the room, some putting their hands to their heads, while others smiled wryly.

“Although, in that case, I would’ve liked another Sigil of the Archdemon,” Zagan said. “That guy being an Archdemon would’ve been really convenient for this.”

“Indeed,” Gremory replied. “Failing to seize Shere Khan’s Sigil was quite the loss.”

“Whatever. We can take their lack of complaints about us claiming three of them as a point of compromise.”

Zagan attempted to move the conversation forward, but the one person who didn’t seem to follow cut in.

“Uh, can you hang on a sec?” Andrealphus asked. “This old man doesn’t really get what you’re talking about.”

“What? And you call yourself our liege’s subordinate?” Gremory retorted. “Now that I look at you, your face certainly lacks in love power.”

“When did I become Zagan’s subordinate?!”

“If not, you’d probably be dead by now.”

Disregarding how he was viewed within this circle, to the world at large, former Archdemon Andrealphus had capitulated to Zagan.

Not that I have any intention of protecting this guy... Still, Zagan didn’t deny it. Annoyed by having to keep this conversation going, he cut to the chase.

“Andrealphus, what do you think is necessary to get these two antagonistic groups to reconcile?”

“I’m scratching my head ’cause I got no clue. What? You planning on making up some convenient enemy for them or something?”

“That would be simple and easy, but it’ll leave the fundamental problem at large. There’s a more peaceful way that the people can get behind.”

It was comical for an Archdemon to speak of peace, but Zagan was dead serious. Andrealphus still had his head cocked in confusion, so Foll answered for him.

“We just get a sorcerer and Angelic Knight to fall in love and stick them together.”

“Ha ha. That’s a pretty good joke, little lady. You can’t...” Andrealphus paused, noticing he was the only one laughing. “Huh...? Seriously?”

“Well, after spending time here, you come to realize that this method is the most appropriate and reliable choice,” Kimaris said.

“It’ll probably work,” Alshiera added with a sigh. “Marchosias never would’ve considered this method. As such, he shouldn’t have any countermeasures in place.”

She sounded somewhat sorrowful about that.

“This was *your* suggestion to begin with,” Zagan said.

When Nephteros’s lifespan as a homunculus had been running out fast, Alshiera had been the one to suggest having Nephteros fall in love to save her. The problem now was who to stick with who.

“It’s better to have multiple candidates. Will Nephteros and Richard work?” Foll asked.

“Richard isn’t a bad choice,” Zagan said, “but Nephteros is too close to the church. She has little influence with sorcerers.”

She still had her title as Bifrons’s disciple, but Bifrons was gone now. Not only that, Nephteros had never been nominated as an Archdemon candidate. In other words, she was unknown to the world of sorcerers.

“Nephteros has finally found someone to depend on. I’d rather leave her be.”

With Nephy’s disapproval, it was now impossible to use them.

“Kee hee, the new Tiger King and Lady Kuroka are more or less right for the job,” Gremory said.

“Gimme a break... Besides, Kurosuke’s part of the church’s dark side. She stood out too much in the recent incident too. She’s got no idea how to even show up at the church anymore, ya know?”

This pair had a major influence on sorcerers, but little on the church. At worst, it was possible the church would excommunicate Kuroka.

“My Silver-Eyed King,” Alshiera said. “Lady Stella, I think her name is? How about your elder sister?”

“Stella...?”

Zagan folded his arms.

In terms of harmony between sorcerers and Angelic Knights, her very existence was a valid answer. But that was exactly why there was a problem too.

“She’s in a weird position where it’s not clear whether she’s a sorcerer or Angelic Knight. Decarabia was the one to be given the name Archdemon Killer. Stella herself is unnamed.”

In terms of strength, she was definitely on the level of an Archdemon candidate. If another seat opened up, it was possible for her to take it. However, Andrealphus had left her more on the Angelic Knight side of things. Because of that, they couldn’t place much hope on her influence on sorcerers.

As for Andrealphus, the way he tried to dodge the question by whistling lousily was grating on the nerves. Things could proceed more smoothly if he sat at the head of the Angelic Knights, but he looked like he had no interest in doing anything of the sort.

“I don’t see a future where Ginias wins her over, anyway,” Zagan said.

“Um, given a few years, I believe he’ll be a splendid gentleman,” Alshiera said, but she was unable to maintain eye contact.

Besides, they didn't have a few years. As such, there was no room to consider the pair. That left them with one choice.

"Kee hee hee! You may leave everything to me! I'll raise those two so that their love power rivals yours, my liege!"

Zagan suddenly felt uneasy, but nobody was better suited to the task than Gremory. This was actually a relatively serious conversation, but as expected, things ended up as always with this granny involved.

"Is it fine to leave her be?" Foll asked, looking up at Nephy.

"Unlike Nephteros, those two can be awfully obstinate, so..."

This could be said to be a serious predicament for Nephy's best friend, but Nephy resigned herself to this outcome and could only strain a smile.

"Well, if y'all think this'll work out, I'll leave it to you," Andrealphus said with a sigh. He still didn't seem to get it but figured it'd be impossible to stop them now. "On an unrelated note, I've got one more request," he added seriously.

"How impudent. You still want something else?" Zagan asked with an annoyed look.

Unperturbed by his attitude, Andrealphus nodded.

"Shax, come with me. I'm gonna give you my everything."

With that, the air froze in silence.



"Achoo!"

In Kianoides's church, Chastille and Barbatos sneezed in unison.

"That's weird. I just got an extremely bad premonition," she mumbled.

"What a coincidence. I've also got a crappy headache," Barbatos added. His head really was pounding.

Chastille was glued to her desk, wearing her usual uniform, whereas Barbatos was lounging on the guest sofa with an open grimoire in his hands. He wasn't in the shadows for once. Instead, he was outside.

Why do I gotta hang around the crybaby in broad daylight?

Space and distance meant nothing to him. He didn't even need to be by Chastille's side to carry out his duty as her guard. He could have easily protected her without showing his face, and he could have even listened in from afar. What's more, Barbatos's base was inside shadows. The mansion was properly melancholic and gloomy, which was endlessly pleasant for a sorcerer. So then, why exactly was he stuck on this sofa in this clean and dazzling office? The immediate reason was his bad friend's command.

"If you don't want to be slandered as a spy or adulterer or peeping ghost, stay boldly out in the open for a while."

Well, he was pretty sure nobody saw him as that last one, at least. In any case, Barbatos had no obligation to obey Zagan, but he honestly had no idea how to resolve the situation otherwise. Even if he tried to run away, he knew Chastille wouldn't follow him. So, left with nothing to lose, he had no choice but to do as Zagan said. Such were the details behind his current predicament.

"You two even sneeze in perfect harmony! You're so in sync!" a girl dressed in a nun's habit exclaimed, raising her voice with a look of extreme satisfaction on her face. Her name was Rachel, and she had light brown hair and freckles. She was fifteen and was only an apprentice nun. She wasn't in a position to come in and out of a bishop's office, but the church was short on hands, so she served as Chastille's errand girl. The girl was no more than an apprentice, so she couldn't do any of the office work, but unknown to others, the tea she prepared cleared the anxiety in Chastille's heart.

Rachel walked up to Chastille and Barbatos, placing a cup of tea down in front of each of them.

"That's not true!" the two yelled in unison.

"Heh heh heh, I know, I know," Rachel replied with a greedy smile. "The world finally sees how well you two get along! I'm so touched!"

Yes. That was the reason for Barbatos's headache. Well, there was one other reason as well, but this was the biggest cause. He was currently under suspicion of having brazenly kidnapped...or to be precise, lured, an Archangel away from the battlefield. Chastille, on the other hand, was under suspicion of deserting

midbattle to be by his side. In short, the two were seen to have eloped midwar.

That ain't what happened at all, dammit!

No matter how badly he denied it, the rumors only intensified. Chastille had tried to vouch for him as well, but that had only made it worse. On the contrary...

"I feel like I finally understand what kind of knight you are. Some may see your motives as impure, but I'd like to accept your choices."

"Wow, to go so far as to make Archdemon Zagan your ally to ensure the survival of the man you fell for. You're amazing. I really respect you."

Barbatos couldn't remember which line came from Arvo and which from Julius, but the two Archangels who'd come from Raziel to fight had ended up reaching some strange understanding.

"How've you seen us 'til now?!" Barbatos yelled at Rachel, his voice turning rough at the thought.

"Huh? I mean, exactly how you'd expect?"

This apprentice nun had become an errand girl immediately after Chastille had returned from a certain evening ball. Rachel didn't normally stand out much, but she'd been working for Chastille for over half a year all the same. Barbatos had always thought that she had a habit of looking his way with a stupid grin on her face, but he had never imagined this was why. He put his hand to his head to hold back the pain while Chastille looked around her office to try to dodge the subject.

"Anyway, the office seems awfully spacious with only the three of us here," she said.

"Oh, you mean just the two of you. Please think of me as nothing more than air," Rachel said with a smile, moving to a corner of the room and suddenly erasing her presence.

Even work-mode Chastille was dumbfounded by being so thoroughly prevented from escaping reality. This was the other cause of Barbatos's headache. For some reason, rather than disparaging him, many turned warm

gazes his way. When Chastille had resigned herself and returned to the church after the battle, she'd even been greeted by clapping.

"No need to worry. I explained the situation to everyone."

That was what the sorcerer who called herself Stella—who was also some kind of Archangel—had said. Unfortunately, she'd immediately returned to Raziel with Head Archangel Ginias, so they never got to ask her for details. It was dreadful to be in the dark about what she'd told the others. It was like making a deal with the devil without knowing what the price was.

Regardless of the truth, Chastille was "an Archangel who colluded with sorcerers." Working off only that description, her fate should've been the same as Valjakka's. So then, why was she receiving everyone's blessings instead of being censured?

Well, that was why Zagan and Gremory had chosen the two of them as sacrifices, but unfortunately for Barbatos, he hadn't been able to eavesdrop on their disturbing meeting from outside the shadows. They'd only talked about it after confirming he hadn't been listening in, anyway.

"K-Kuroka, Nephteros, and Richard are all in Raziel, after all," Chastille said, pulling herself back together. That meant nobody was around to assist Chastille with her work, but all things considered, not much could be done about that fact.

First, there was the annoying black cat. She'd not only handily overwhelmed the former Head Archangel, but had even defeated the strongest Archangel. Sure, she was affiliated with the church, but it was problematic for an Azazel agent, a member of the church's seedy underbelly, to have overpowered multiple Archangels. In Barbatos's opinion, it was better to make use of what they had on hand, but the church apparently had to worry about saving face or something. It all sounded like a pain in the ass. In short, it was unclear whether they should praise her in the light or bury her in the darkness. As such, she was currently in hiding in Raziel with Raphael, who also had a need to remain hidden.

"Well, I get the cat and the guy who picked up a Sacred Sword disappearing, I guess," Barbatos said with a grimace. "But, uh, why's the elf gone too?"

Richard had become Sacred Sword Camael's wielder. Thus, the church had to hold a formal succession ritual or something. Barbatos somewhat understood that part, but it should've been fine for Nephteros to stay here on her own to help Chastille with her work.

"Nephteros is under Zagan's protection, but it's better to make her position clear," Chastille said, shaking her head. "As she is Lady Oberon's daughter, the church now has a responsibility to throw their weight behind protecting her."

That, of course, came with a whole set of its own problems, but it was important in the sense of diminishing how many enemies she had. In any case, that Angelic Knight Richard was now an Archangel. And so, he couldn't simply stick around as Chastille's subordinate anymore. It was unlikely he'd even come back to Kianoides. As such, it was questionable whether Nephteros would return either.

That don't mean nothing if you end up with everything on your goddamn shoulders.

This girl was working away on yet another mountain of documents by herself...and Barbatos couldn't stand watching her do so.

"Well, I'm not sure what'll happen to them," Chastille said with a troubled smile, acting like everything was the same as usual. "But at least I know Kuroka will return in three days. I just have to hold on until then."

"Haaah... I wonder 'bout that," Barbatos huffed to the side in irritation.

Chastille stared at him for a while, analyzing his face.

"What?" he scoffed at her.

"It's just...um, are you maybe worried about me?"

"W-W-W-Wuh?! Why would I ever worry 'bout you?!" he yelled, unintentionally raising his voice.

Chastille twiddled her fingers, a little red in the cheeks, as she replied, "I-I mean, you're making the same face as *back then*..."

Barbatos cocked his head, unable to figure out what she meant, and asked, "Back when?"

“Um, back then...when Foll joined the battle... You understand, right?”

“Huuuh?”

By “battle,” was she referring to the fight against “Nephteros” the other day? Frankly, Barbatos had remained in the shadows pretty much the whole time, so he felt like he hadn’t actually shown her his face even once.

Hang on, the little brat joined before that.

Foll had intruded on the battle with the Nephilim. And because the little dragon had blabbed about Nephteros, Barbatos had gotten stuck with taking part in that troublesome fight. Thinking back on it, that dispute had led to suspicions of Barbatos and Chastille eloping.

“You’re definitely not gonna live a long life.”

After that, Chastille had affirmed Barbatos’s statement. He’d snapped at the thought and had yelled at her, but she’d understood the reason for his anger and had told him she’d surely return. That was why Barbatos had had no choice but to follow her.

So then, what kind of face had he made at the time? Once he remembered, he felt his cheeks burn up. Seeing that, Chastille’s cheeks also flushed red.

Meaning I’m worried about her again? Worried about this crybaby?

Now that he thought of it, he might’ve felt some smidgen of concern ever since he’d started his duty as her guard. That was basically what his exasperation from watching this unreliable girl amounted to, after all. Above all else, though, the fact that Chastille had seen right through him made him want to claw his own heart out.

“Gah, ghhh...” Barbatos groaned incomprehensibly, then heard the sound of something hitting the floor. He turned around to look...and spotted the apprentice nun, who had collapsed with a beaming smile and a bloody nose.

“Oh Heavenly Father...my faith has been proven correct. The world is so beautiful...”

“R-Rachel?!” Chastille shrieked and ran over to her before Barbatos sighed at the familiar scene.

This wasn't the *real* reason for his headache.

I can't go lookin' for her birthday present when I'm cooped up in here!

The month of Thalassa was ending, and it would soon be Arnaki. Chastille's birthday was on Arnaki nineteenth. Unknown to all around him, Barbatos agonized over having yet to decide what to get her.



"Shax, come with me. I'm gonna give you my everything."

Back in Archdemon Palace, Andrealphus's simple statement dominated the throne room, leading to an unprecedented atmosphere dominating the place. Shax was clearly frozen in place, Kimaris stepped forth as if to protect him, Foll drew back as if truly disgusted, and Nephy put herself on guard to protect her daughter.

Alshiera hung her head with an expression that asked, "Is this because I hit him too hard?"

Whereas Gremory trembled in excitement, yelling, "To think love power can bud from such rubbish!"

As for the one who'd created this bizarre atmosphere, Andrealphus simply blinked in confusion and cocked his head as he asked, "Huh? Did I say something weird?"

Zagan put his hand to his head, knowing he couldn't leave such statements in a murky state.

"Uhhh... Listen, everyone is free to love who they want. There's no logic behind the act, after all. But...this guy's already got his heart set on someone else. Can I get you to give up somehow?"

Shax had nearly been killed so many times over and had finally gotten Kuroka's foster father to approve of their relationship. Whatever the circumstances, it was unbearable to watch someone cut in between them.

"Quit being so understanding!" Andrealphus screamed in shock, finally realizing what he'd said. "You've got it all wrong, okay?! I don't swing that way! I prefer young girls like the ladies over there!"

He pointed at Nephy and Foll, which made Zagan slowly rise to his feet.

“I’ll give you a single chance. After all, everyone has a slip of the tongue every now and then. No matter how disgusting a man you are, you haven’t been looking at my bride and daughter with such insolent eyes, have you now?”

Even a villain deserved just one chance at doing things over. That was Zagan’s principle. Yes, he only gave one. And presented with this singular opportunity, the old man finally crouched to the ground in tears.

“I’m telling you you’ve got it wrooong!” he wailed sorrowfully, which resonated through Archdemon Palace.

Several minutes later, the former Head Archdemon started talking, cradling his knees and sniffing all the while as he said, “You know, among the new Archdemons, Lord Shax is the only one who doesn’t have a teacher, right? So, even if I’m not really suitable for the role, I thought I could be of some help.”

“If that’s true, just put it that way from the start. How misleading,” Zagan replied.

“Please forgive me. I’m really bad with words,” Andrealphus muttered as if he was fed up with the world.

“What’s with that repulsive behavior?” Zagan asked, holding back a headache.

“Isn’t this the way the boy originally talked?” Alshiera said. “Back when he came to me some time ago, he was like this.”

“Back when he came to you...? Oh, you mean when you struck him down?”

“I only gently brushed him aside.”

Two hundred years ago, Andrealphus had challenged Alshiera. With more of his unwanted past dredged up, Andrealphus stared a hole through the stains on the floor as if he was seriously considering killing himself. That was when Shax scratched his head and finally spoke up.

“Let’s cut him some slack there. So? What do you mean by taking me on as a disciple?”

“Oh, uh...Void was originally my sorcery, so I was thinking of imparting its

proper use to you, Lord Shax.”

“Can you return to normal already? Getting teased around here is pretty much an everyday thing.”

Andrealphus rose to his feet and wiped away his tears.

“I’m finally starting to see how you grew so strong,” Shax said.

“Can you stop understanding that kinda stuff already?” Andrealphus pleaded.

In any case, his statement made perfect sense to Zagan.

I’m the one who taught Shax Void, after all.

Void was a form of peerless sorcery that ground time to a practical halt. It was the power that had elevated Shax to the seat of an Archdemon, but it’d been stolen from Andrealphus by Zagan to begin with, so it was, in fact, inferior to the original.

“Shax’s power as an Archdemon will become rock-solid if you teach him...” Zagan said. “But what the hell do *you* have to gain from it?”

“I guess I’ll benefit by having my sorcery preserved for posterity,” Andrealphus answered, folding his arms and looking far off into the distance. “Stella was more of a patient than a disciple, you see. I taught her the basics, but nothing else. That idiot Decarabia killed my right-hand man and body double, so if I die, I’ll have left nothing behind. I guess that’s why.”

A sorcerer’s research could be said to be proof of their very existence. As such, even though sorcerers were endlessly selfish, they took on disciples. Andrealphus was considering retirement, so it was natural for him to look for someone to inherit his power.

“But what’re you gonna do, specifically?” Shax asked, still as confused as ever. “You’re not gonna spout some nonsense about training a sorcerer, right?”

Sorcerers grew stronger by acquiring knowledge. Gaining strength through an accumulation of training was an Angelic Knight’s way. Despite this, however, Andrealphus nodded in affirmation.

“That’s exactly what we’re gonna do.”

“Huh?”

“Void only truly works when you can use it at a moment’s notice like a reflex...and the only way to get it to that level is through training. You get me, right, Zagan?”

“It irks me to agree with you, but I do,” Zagan answered with a nod.

When creating Heaven’s Ring, even Zagan had needed Kimaris as a training partner to adapt to the speed. Thus, he understood exactly where Andrealphus was coming from.

“That’s the gist of it,” Andrealphus said with a smile. “I’m gonna get you strong enough to at least beat me on your own!”

“Don’t be so unreasonable!” Shax screamed.

Even after losing his Sigil of the Archdemon, Andrealphus undoubtedly lived up to his title as the strongest. Most of the current crop of Archdemons would have found it quite difficult to defeat him.

“I see,” Zagan said, nodding expressionlessly. “Very well, then. Take Shax with you. However, you only have three days. That’s when Kuroka returns. Settle things before then.”

“What?! Not you too, boss! You’re not actually serious, right?!”

“Does it look like I’m joking?” Zagan replied with a deadly serious expression on his face.

Shax was left speechless.

“Um, Lord Andrealphus is about as strong as Master Zagan, right?” Nephy asked timidly. “If so, aren’t those conditions a little harsh?”

Shax nodded vigorously. Unfortunately for him, Nephy was the only one present who harbored such doubts.

“I don’t think so,” Foll said. “Shax was granted more than me and Nephy. He’s just got no spine.”

“Granted...?” Nephy repeated curiously.

“She’s right,” Kimaris added. “For example, Miss Gremory taught me sorcery,

and I've been granted power by one Archdemon, Sir Zagan. In your case, Lady Nephy, you've received lessons from two Archdemons, Sir Zagan and Lady Orias."

"Ah..."

With that, Nephy came to an understanding.

"Zagan, Shere Khan, and Andrealphus," Foll murmured in exasperation. "Shax is the only one here who was granted knowledge by three Archdemons."

Shax's eyes shot open, though he remained silent. In a sense, he was more blessed than any other sorcerer. He couldn't complain if anyone gave him a good smacking for acting so timid. He ruffled his hair, then shrugged in resignation.

"Fine... If I falter now, I definitely won't be able to face Raphael. I can't promise that I'll pull it off in three days, though."

Well, chickening out there was pretty much to be expected of him.

I'm pretty sure he can do it with enough motivation...

However, he knew putting too much hope in him would only increase Shax's burden. Thus, Zagan smiled and relaxed a little...though it looked a lot more like a sneer to everyone else.

"You had help, but you've defeated him once already," Zagan declared. "Just go and take it easy."

"I'm pretty sure you're the only one who can put it like that, Boss."

Nevertheless, that was enough to undo some of his tension. Shax's expression was just a little more relaxed. In contrast, a vein popped on Andrealphus's brow.

"Oh? What's this? Are you looking down on this old man? Well, I sure am fired up now! Try not to die on me! Ha ha ha!"

"Please don't be too hard on me."

Andrealphus left with Shax in tow, which marked the end of this little meeting in the throne room.

“Very well, Sir Zagan. We shall also excuse ourselves.”

“Kee hee hee, it’s going to get so fu... I mean, busy! Hngh, I must play with my new Archdemon-approved toys with great care!”

“Miss Gremory...there’s no point in trying to hide your intentions if you’re going to blurt that out right after.”

Zagan thought he’d added to Kimaris’s anxieties as the two of them then left the throne room. Foll started heading toward the door as well.

“I’m gonna go look at the Nephilim town.”

“Okay. I leave it in your hands, Foll,” Zagan said. “You may take Dexia and Aristella with you. An Archdemon should have attendants, after all.”

“Really? All right, then. I’ll take them with me.”

He’d exaggerated a little, but those twins were also Nephilim. Thus, bringing them along should’ve been of some use. What’s more, having someone to consult would take the load off her shoulders. In terms of strength, they weren’t anywhere close to the former Archdemon candidates, but they were still top-notch sorcerers. They were sure to fulfill the role of Foll’s attendants.

Foll nodded, prompting Zagan to snap his finger to deploy a magic circle.

“Also, you may take this with you,” he said as he handed her one of the mysterious legacies from within Archdemon Palace’s treasury. His subordinates had been analyzing it and had finally made some progress recently.

“This thing is apparently made from material unlike any other in this world. It’s not even clear whether it’s organic or not. All we know is that it is a preposterously hard unknown substance. Because of that, it was strictly kept under lock and key in Marchosias’s treasury.”

“An unknown substance...?” Alshiera repeated dubiously. “May I look at it?”

“Very well.”

Alshiera took the object and observed it closely.

“I thought it’d be related to our recent troubles, but I suppose that was needless anxiety. There’s nothing particularly strange about it.”

In that case, it had nothing to do with Azazel. Zagan had no idea who had made it or what it was for, but there was no use in letting it go to waste. Besides, Zagan's intuition was telling him that it was a lucky find.

"Thanks, Zagan. I'll do my best," Foll said.

"It's no problem, really. Don't do anything reckless though, understand?"

"Got it. I'm off."

Foll left the throne room with light steps as if she'd just gotten a new toy.

Now then! I'm finally alone with Nephy for the first time in a...

Zagan turned to face Nephy, then noticed the vampire still standing next to her.

"Oh my, it seems I'm in the way," Alshiera said. "I have to go with Foll, so I'll be excusing myself here."

"Please wait a minute."

Just as Alshiera was about to leave, Nephy called her to a stop. She was making a face like she didn't know why she'd stopped the vampire, but eventually let out a troubled smile.

"Um, why don't you spend some time with Master Zagan, mother?"

"Hwuh? Th-That's, um... Wouldn't that mean you get less time with him?"

She had a point, but Nephy simply shook her head and replied, "When things were still awkward with my mother after our first meeting, Master Zagan gave us the time to smooth things over. As such..."

Nephy wanted to do the same for Zagan... No, she actually worried about his parental relationship far more than Zagan had about hers.

How pathetic! I even made Nephy worry about me!

Zagan was a parent too, so he knew he couldn't leave things like this. As such, he gathered his resolve and nodded.

"Sorry for making you fuss over us so much, Nephy."

"It's nothing. I'm the one who's being a little too impertinent..."

“That’s completely understandable. Your feelings have gotten across to me.”

If he was capable of turning even a tenth of such consideration toward others, this problem wouldn’t have even existed, but Zagan wasn’t very self-aware.

“Then please excuse me...”

Nephy exited the throne room, leaving only Zagan and Alshiera behind. And once again, a gut-wrenching silence fell over the area.



Zagan was the first to speak in the heavy atmosphere.

“Alshiera, do you have any knowledge of chess?”

“Huh? Well, I’m about average at it...”

“Then have a match with me. I’ve been having a hard time with my butler. I haven’t beaten him once yet.”

Zagan had once likened chess to military strategy, but when he’d tried putting that into practice, he’d suffered quite the ignominious defeat by Raphael. He thought he was actually quite skilled at observing the situation and reading ahead, but he couldn’t beat his butler at chess.

Zagan swung his arm lightly, bringing a table, chairs, and the chessboard sliding into place. He snapped his fingers, and the thirty-two mithril pieces lined themselves in place.

Pawn, knight, bishop, rook, queen, and king—these six types of pieces moved in different ways, giving the game a fair amount of depth.

“Will I do as an opponent?” Alshiera asked, blinking in surprise.

“You gifted me this thing. Do you object to showing me how it’s played?”

“Tee hee, when you put it like that, I can’t refuse.”

Alshiera finally smiled and took a seat across from him. Zagan quietly picked up a piece to make the first move. He chose a pawn. It was possible to advance it two squares on its first move, but Zagan only moved it one.

“That’s an unexpectedly slow advance,” Alshiera commented. “Do you feel tense having to play exactly by the rules? The usual Silver-Eyed King would’ve

been far more daring.”

Perhaps because he’d asked her to show him how to play, Alshiera said quite a lot about his first move.

Can you really tell that much from so little? He actually did feel tense. He had no experience in playing games with others. Moreover, he was troubled by how to have a conversation with his mother. This un-Archdemon-like nervousness might’ve come across in his opening move.

Alshiera picked up the pawn in line with the one Zagan had started with—the one right in front of her king—and moved it two squares forward. That left one space between the two pieces. Zagan ignored this and picked a pawn to the right of his king—the one in front of his knight—moving it two squares forward. As if to constrain this move, Alshiera placed a pawn back and to the right of her first one.

It felt like she was matching Zagan’s movements and steadily closing in on him rather than playing carefully.

She’s always been watching over me like this, hasn’t she...?

After a few more turns, Zagan finally spoke.

“By the way, how the hell should I refer to you?”

“I... I’m at your mercy.”

She sounded like she wanted him to refer to her as his mother, but also like she didn’t.

Leaving this to others is just the same as usual for her...but I guess that goes for me too. Just like the father he’d met had said, maybe Zagan was actually similar to Alshiera. After giving it some thought, Zagan moved his rook far to the front.

“Then I’ll call you mom.”

“Is that really all right with you?” Alshiera asked, blinking once more.

“What about it?”

“I...don’t think I have the right to be called that.”

Zagan couldn't hide his amused smile. *Orias pretty much said the same thing.* As such, he already knew what to say.

"I don't know you well enough to make a decision based on rights or qualifications or whatnot. So, we have no choice but to start by getting to know each other."

Alshiera smiled, a nostalgic look in her eyes. "That part of you is so similar to him."

"To the Silver-Eyed King?"

"Yes..."

She didn't want him to ask about this. She placed her bishop in an annoying spot as if to tell him not to pry. If that was enough to get him to back down, though, he wouldn't have invited her to a game of chess. Zagan boldly moved his knight to block the bishop.

"It really is misleading," he said. "How long do you plan on calling me the Silver-Eyed King?"

"Do you not like it?"

"It's confusing when there are three people with that title. Who the hell do you think you're referring to each time you say it?"

"....."

A long silence fell over them. Alshiera moved her bishop a step back as if looking for an excuse.

"I wasn't able to protect you, even though you were only seven."

"Who cares? I don't remember anything about my life before I was sifting through trash. It's a bother for you to feel responsibility for things I don't remember."

Zagan recalled Alshiera's figure inside that barrier. In all likelihood, she'd been used as a sacrifice to seal Azazel, becoming a part of that pillar, her body turning into a substance that was neither stone nor lead.

How am I supposed to complain after seeing that? She'd failed to protect him

even after staking her life on it. That was how difficult that era had been. Although indirectly, Zagan knew how desperately she'd lived during that age.

"I already have a daughter in Foll. I'll gladly throw away my life or anything else to protect her. I'll even calmly dirty my hands if I have to as well."

This was a path he'd already been walking down.

"Even if my daughter comes to hate me, I'll still choose to do so. That's what it means to be a parent, in my opinion. Do you think differently?"

"I..."

Alshiera couldn't voice her answer. That was an eloquent answer in its own right.

Meaning she's the same as me.

But she hadn't had enough power. Considering the enemy she'd been fighting, nobody could blame her for that.

"If that ever happens, I wouldn't want my daughter to continue hating me," Zagan continued. "If I can't reach a compromise with my mom over the same thing, I'd be a terrible hypocrite."

Alshiera smiled bitterly as if she found his logic ridiculous.

"Tee hee, so in the end, it's all for Foll's sake?"

"What's wrong with that? I'm a parent. It's only natural to want to be loved by your child."

"Then I'll have to thank her."

"Of course you should. She's a good child. I'm proud of her," Zagan said, taking one of Alshiera's pawns with his knight. "We've gone off track. So, will you do something about calling me the Silver-Eyed King?"

"Gh..."

She'd probably been hoping to end this conversation on a good note. Alshiera clearly grimaced. She moved her queen forward as if to try and hide this, but it was a blunder that showed her wavering heart.

"A poor move," Zagan said.

“Ah.”

Zagan mercilessly took the defenseless queen with his knight. Alshiera let out a small sigh, then opened her mouth as if to award him a prize.

“Lucia.”

He knew this was a name, but had never heard it before.

“What?”

“That is your father’s name.”

Zagan gulped. He never thought she’d suddenly tell him the name she’d kept so desperately hidden all this time.

I see. So his name’s Lucia. Zagan didn’t know if his friend went by that name now, but strangely enough, he felt just a little closer to him now.

“Unfortunately, I can’t speak the first Silver-Eyed King’s name. More precisely...”

“Even if you speak it, I won’t be able to perceive it?”

“So you’re aware. Yes, that’s exactly right. Even if they hear the name, nobody is able to remember it.”

When Kuroka and Shax had clashed with Asura and Bato, those two heroes of the past had apparently spoken his name too. Kuroka had reported being incapable of hearing it, but in truth, she’d forgotten it the moment it’d been spoken.

“That man was your grandfather,” Alshiera said.

“I see.”

Well, Zagan had figured he’d be related in some way, but not that closely.

“That’s why Silver-Eyed King isn’t a title for an individual, but for a bloodline.”

Alshiera paused there, then took a deep breath—not that this did anything for the undead—and finally looked Zagan straight in the eyes.

“Zagan, you are the third Silver-Eyed King, the son I failed to protect a thousand years ago.”

The girl who never answered no matter what people asked her did her best to do so now.

A thousand years... So that's really the case. Zagan nodded as he digested the meaning behind those words.

"Can I ask one thing?" he said.

"I don't know if I can answer, though."

In this respect, she was the same as ever.

"If you can't, then just remain silent. The dad Shere Khan resurrected was younger than me. If he died at that age, then who among the bloodline remained in Liucaon?"

Alshiera looked at him with unfathomable sorrow in her eyes.

"It was your little sister," she answered.

"My...sister?"

"Yes. You had a twin. Her name was Lilithiera."

Zagan's expression turned grim. Before he could voice his suspicions, Alshiera shook her head.

"She's not the same girl. Succubus blood was very prominent in Lilithiera, so once in a while, girls bearing a remarkable resemblance to her are born in the Hypnoel family. That's why I gave her the name Lilithiera."

In other words, of the three royal families of Liucaon, the Silver-Eyed King's blood ran thickest in the Hypnoels.

"Why would you do that?"

"Because one day, I hoped you would meet her by chance..."

Zagan ruffled his hair. *Now that she mentioned it, Lilith never felt like a stranger to me for some reason...* Nephy had also gotten jealous, thinking Zagan paid too much attention to Lilith. He tried shaking off the bewilderment building up inside him by moving a pawn forward, when...

"Tee hee, that's check."

“Mrgh...”

This time, Zagan had made a poor move. He tried thinking up a way to make a comeback, but no matter what, this would be over in a few more turns.

“I concede,” he said.

“You lost focus right at the end.”

“Hmph... Whatever.”

Alshiera rose from her seat to leave, and Zagan called to her back once more.

“I’m glad we spoke...but next time, I won’t lose, mom.”

Alshiera gulped, then turned around with a gentle smile that Zagan had never expected to see from her.

“I’ll play with you any time you want, Zagan.”

Such was the conversation between the endlessly awkward mother and son.



After losing to Alshiera at chess, Zagan made his way to the workshop he’d granted Naberius in Archdemon Palace. The sooty room was made of stone bricks and was equipped with a fireplace that’d been remodeled as a furnace.

There was a large table in the center of the room. Small stands made from stumps sat in front of the furnace. Each had tools like saws, pliers, files, chisels, and hammers scattered atop them. Among all these items, there were delicate gears and springs no longer than a pinky nail atop the table.

The present they were making right now was a collaborative project. Zagan planned out what it would look like and the sorcery planted within, while Naberius handled its creation and the finely detailed devices needed to make it work.

The beholder was somewhat of a jester when it came to his outer appearance and behavior, but as the Mystic Artisan, there was nothing to criticize when it came to his work. While Zagan had been going through that silly ruckus in the throne room, Naberius had been diligently continuing his work.

“How’s it going, Naberius?”

“Hmm, so-so, I guess.”

Zagan grimaced at this answer. “Hm? Is there a problem?”

There was only a month until Nephy’s birthday. Any problems had to be resolved quickly.

“I wouldn’t really call it a problem...” Naberius answered. “You might even have some on hand. I’m pretty sure Marchosias’s treasury has some.”

“Quit skirting around it. What do you need?”

“Spirit Blood.”

That was the name of a particularly powerful and beautiful gem among the many magical gems in this world. In the current day and age, no one knew how to mine or refine it, so it was something like the mithril of gems.

“Ah, yes, we do...” Zagan answered. “You need some?”

Power always had a cost. Spirit Blood’s unpleasant name came from the fact that it was cursed. It was said that it would devour and kill any sorcerer unsuitable to be its master.

I don’t really want to use any for Nephy’s present, even if it’s just a piece of it.

“That’s just superstition,” Naberius said with a snort. “At the very least, I’ve never met any misfortune after handling the stuff for centuries. To begin with, it’s... Never mind, that doesn’t really matter.”

Put face-to-face with this man, it felt like the curse would be more the liable of the two to run away in fear. Zagan gave him a suspicious look, and Naberius continued in an unexpectedly serious tone.

“To get the sorcery you’re planning on using to function properly, we need a magic gem with at least that much power. If we pick something unsuitable, the wielder could be consumed.”

“Mrgh...”

With that, it was hard for Zagan to refuse. He folded his arms and groaned before answering in a grave voice.

“Let me think it over for a bit. We’ll go with that if there aren’t any

substitutes.”

“I’m telling you there aren’t.”

“Even so.”

He couldn’t possibly give Nephy something shady as her first birthday present, but if Naberius claimed it was an absolute necessity, then there was no other choice. Zagan understood this. He groaned at the thought.

“By the way, it looks like you had a visitor,” Naberius said, glancing in the general direction of the door.

“Hm? Aah, Andrealphus. He just retired, so he needs someone to back him,” Zagan answered, dodging the topic of the Nephilim.

“I heard Bifrons beat him,” Naberius said with a sigh. “I’m surprised he survived. I doubt Bifrons missed the chance to deliver a finishing blow.”

“They probably had to capture him alive. Thanks to that, we suffered significant losses,” Zagan spat out in irritation.

“You’re not going to ask how Bifrons’s last moments went?”

Bifrons had abducted Nephteros when she’d been on the verge of death, and had hence saved her by granting her the body of a Nephilim. However, Zagan hadn’t been told how the Archdemon had met their end after that. Nephteros had never brought it up, and Zagan believed that she was the only one who needed to know. If she didn’t speak of it, there was no need for him to know.

“I’m not interested,” Zagan said, shaking his head.

“How cold. You had a particularly long association with Bifrons compared to all the other Archdemons, didn’t you?”

That association had been as enemies. Looking back on it, they’d been a nuisance the entire time.

“I said I’m not interested,” Zagan answered bluntly, then swung back his mantle and thrust a finger at Naberius. “If Bifrons died, it was in satisfaction, right?”

The one eye visible behind Naberius’s mask stared back in wonder.

“Satisfaction...?”

“You heard me. Bifrons was a sorcerer who put their life on the line to harass others. If they died, it was in satisfaction. If not, they would crawl through the dirt and subsist on mud just to survive and harass someone else. That’s the kind of sorcerer they were.”

Half a month had passed since then, and Nephteros was still fine. As such, Bifrons had been satisfied with the conclusion. If not, they’d be back already, even if undead. That was Zagan’s belief.

“You understand Bifrons unexpectedly well,” Naberius said, shaking with laughter.

“Don’t say such disgusting things. Failing to understand your enemy will get the rug swept out from under your feet, that’s all.”

“I suppose,” Naberius said with an emotional sigh. “You’re right. Bifrons definitely went with satisfaction.”

“Were you two close?” Zagan asked with a grimace.

“Yes. We were besties.”

“I don’t understand that guy’s tastes anymore.”

Zagan couldn’t even imagine Naberius and Bifrons getting along, but the person in question claimed it to be the case, so they were probably actually friends.

“Oh yes, there was one other Archdemon who rather liked Bifrons,” Naberius added as if suddenly remembering.

“Hmm, let’s hear it.”

This was an Archdemon that Zagan would have to prioritize killing.

“Lord of Murder Glasya-Labolas—a magnificent artist.”

Zagan reflexively put himself on guard at the mention of such a worthless second name. Not really paying attention to Zagan’s reaction, Naberius continued talking nostalgically.

“He always talks about how beautiful suffering is and what the most efficient

methods are for tormenting people. I believe his experiments have even destroyed an entire town.”

“I thank you for the information. I now know he’s someone that mustn’t be allowed to continue existing.”

“Can you not put it like I just sold him out?”

There was a reproachful tone to Naberius’s voice, but Zagan ignored this and chewed on the name of the new enemy he had to be rid of.



“Someone! Someone save me!”

A bloodcurdling scream resounded through the town. That wasn’t surprising. An abnormal shadow towered over the area as if to pierce the moon. At a glance, it looked like “something” had been made of a string of crumpled paper. However, it was nearly as tall as the church’s steeple. Despite its size, what appeared to be its limbs flapped in the wind. It was impossible to gauge its mass. It clearly wasn’t some sort of animal. It was as if it’d crawled out of a gap in the night, suddenly standing there before anyone knew it.

And then the slaughter began. Fragments of human meat were already scattered all over, some of it sticking to the screaming man’s face.

“Eeeek!”

“W-Wait! Don’t leave me!”

The man ran away while wetting his pants, leaving behind a young woman who’d fallen to the ground. She couldn’t get any strength into her legs to stand back up. The fantastical being’s limbs swayed lazily toward her.

“Huh?”

An instant later, a flimsy-looking arm stretched out like a slender blade. The girl screamed, fully under the impression she’d been decapitated.

“That was close. You’re all right now.”

The stretching blade was stopped by a delicate finger. A sorcerer had appeared out of nowhere as if to protect the girl. Beautiful silver hair swayed

beneath the sorcerer's hood in the wind.

“Ggghhh...?”

The abnormal being was either trying to push or pull on the blade, but it couldn't move it an inch. It was as if its limb was sewn into space. Sensing the enemy before it, the being's body split into thousands of pieces and spread over the area.

“Wh-What?”

The girl raised her voice in terror. The being continued spreading across a wide area as if to fully envelop the sorcerer. If it unleashed the same attack as before, the sorcerer would be torn to shreds from every direction. And yet, the sorcerer smiled calmly.

“It's useless. You're already dead.”

The being's blade remained affixed in the air. A black light burned on the sorcerer's fingertip, and on the back of that same hand glowed a sinister and sublime Sigil.

“Blackest Black.”

A wet crunch resounded in the air. The abnormal being, who'd been spread over a wide area, compressed into a single point as if sucked into the black light. It was somewhat similar to a huge mass of paper being crumpled into a ball.

“Graaaaargh!”

Leaving behind an ear-splitting scream, the thing shattered like glass.

Though it resembled paper, it made wet noises when crushed, and it shattered like glass. These beings were so far beyond human understanding.

Having obliterated it with a single finger, the sorcerer turned her back to the half-moon. Holding down her long hair in the wind, she appeared to be a young girl around fifteen or sixteen years old.

Her lovely face still looked very childish. Her long silver hair flowed down to her chest like silk. She wore a pitch-black robe over her shoulders, and a silver pendant hung from her neck. However, none of these were her most prominent feature. Strangely enough, deep inside her violet pupils was a mysterious light

in the shape of a star or cross or something.

“So pretty...”

The girl, who’d been moments from wetting herself in fear, stared in fascination at the sorcerer’s eyes.

“What bad luck you have, to be attacked by a demon of all things.”

“A...demon?”

“Yes. I don’t know what exactly they are either, but these monsters have been appearing a lot lately.”

As far as the sorcerer knew, this was the sixth case, and all in one month too. For the Angelic Knights, a company-scaled force would have to be assembled around several Sacred Swords to take on a single one of them. For sorcerers, it would require someone on the level of an Archdemon. If such beings frequently appeared, the entire world would be brought to ruin in an instant.

While Archdemon Zagan and Shere Khan had their fun little war to the south, this sorcerer had been fighting demons. She smiled down at the girl to calm her down, then reached out to her. The girl tried to take her hand as if it were the perfectly natural thing to do—and had her hand slapped away.

“I saved you, so pay up.”

“Wha?!”

The pitiful girl timidly held out her wallet.

“Huh? Is your life only worth ten gold coins? Are you just some cheap gem?”

“Please forgive me! That’s everything I have!”

The sorcerer snatched the girl’s wallet, and the girl ran away in tears.

“Haaa... She didn’t even have a single jewel on her. Isn’t she ashamed to be alive? Ah, what a waste of effort.”

The sorcerer flicked the coins she’d taken from the girl and cursed. This was Archdemon Asmodeus. Her second name was Collector—a tremendous miser.

The waterway going northwest from Kianoides led to the largest lake on the continent, Suflaghida. On its shore was the small town of Paralynia. It had once

been as prosperous as Kianoides, but due to the land sinking, a majority of the town had become submerged and abandoned. What little was left was connected by several bridges.

The turmoil caused by the demon's appearance was starting to settle down gradually. Crying could be heard here and there, but the church had begun cleaning up the bodies. The pitiful girl who'd run away was probably introducing the man who'd abandoned her to the palm of her hand by now.

The miser of a sorcerer sat atop a bridge, looking down over the town.

"My beautiful lady, shouldn't you better choose the time and place to collect your treasures?"

Someone suddenly held out a pink flower to the girl's side. She didn't even give it a second glance, but she knew it was a blooming lily. She responded to the gentle old man's voice with a fake smile.

"Aha, could you not approach me so casually, Glasya-Labolas?"

She crushed the pink flower. It was as if it had been squashed from the inside out. An old gentleman stood next to her. His blond hair had gray streaks, and he wore a black top hat. He had a stylish tailcoat with a crimson ribbon tie. He wore an old-fashioned frock over his shoulders and carried a cane in one hand that had a handle fashioned after a dog's head. He wore a monocle over his right eye and had a short beard. He looked completely unrelated to any form of conflict, but the girl had referred to him with the name of an Archdemon.

The old gentleman looked down at the flower that had vanished without having even scattered its petals, then muttered sadly, "How contemptible. Even a flower has life. You must respect each and every life equally."

"I don't want to be told that by a homicidal maniac."

Lord of Murder Glasya-Labolas—that was this Archdemon's name.

"Don't you find human life to be priceless?" he asked.

"I hate people, so I don't get it."

There were many Archdemons who didn't think of humans as people, but this girl was pretty much the only one who showed clear hatred for them. Because

of that, she got along pretty well with Archdemon Orias and Furcas.

I wonder if those two are dead... She'd heard that Orias had been defeated and Furcas's survival was currently unknown. She was surprised by how sad she felt about these facts.

The old gentleman slumped his shoulders in sorrow, which brought the girl back to her senses.

"By the way, I smell some pretty fresh blood," she said with a snort. "Did you kill someone?"

"Yes. A young man who ran away after abandoning his lover. I wonder what he thought in his final moments, having made his wretched escape but unable to run away from fate. Was it the lover he abandoned? Or maybe his family? No matter how despicable one is, those last moments truly are heartbreaking, aren't they?"

"I'd rather you not look for any sympathy from me... I *steal* things, but I'm not in the habit of killing people."

"Oh? I believed you would understand, O Great Collector," the old man said with a tinge of regret.

Sensing that there was no point in continuing this conversation, the girl shook her head.

"So? What do you need?" she asked. "You're not gonna tell me another demon showed up already, are you?"

"No. As fellows who have joined forces under *his* flag, I came to try and deepen our relationship."

"Gimme a break. I don't want people to think I'm hanging out with you." The girl maintained her fake smile and narrowed her violet eyes sharply. "Is that guy actually the real thing?"

"Oh, do you doubt him?"

Clutching the pendant hanging from her neck, the girl showed emotion for the first time.

"No sorcery can bring back the dead," she answered.

True, no sorcery could do it. It was impossible. That was why the girl had sought the answer from magical relics instead, but that hadn't worked either.

Even after collecting treasures across the whole world, nothing could create such a miracle.

That was why she'd been reduced to such unsightly depths. The dead couldn't be brought back. She was capable of making that statement more clearly than anyone in the world.

"Nobody believed it. That's why only three of us gathered, right?" she said.

One year ago, the great sorcerer who'd led all the Archdemons had died. However, after all this time, that sorcerer had apparently been resurrected once more as an Archdemon. The current Archdemons weren't so senile that they'd accept such a story at face value.

The Sigil of the Archdemon looked like the real thing, though...

"We aren't very prudent, after all. We'd do well to be more careful," the old man agreed with a nod. "However, in my opinion, I believe that Astrologian answering the call gives him some credence."

"Astrologian Eligor? I never know what she's thinking. I'm bad at dealing with her."

Well, nobody really knew what any of the Archdemons were thinking.

Asmodeus, Glasya-Labolas, and Eligor were the three Archdemons who'd gathered this time around. The girl's pendant clicked. It wasn't visible in the darkness of the night, but it was like a locket had opened.

"If he's not the real thing, then he'd be a well-made replica..." the old man said, putting his hand to his chin.

In other words, a fake.

I've got no obligation to obey a fake.

Or so the girl thought to herself, but that dreadful Archdemon might've succeeded where she'd failed. His power had simply been that fathomless.

"Wasn't Shere Khan researching stuff like that?" the girl muttered.

“Something called Nephilim.”

“Apparently so. A cat’s Neph... A cat? Cat... Pffft.”

The old man suddenly put his hand to his mouth and turned to the side.

Uhhh, what the hell was that? Don’t tell me, is he laughing? Gross.

Seeing the terrifying Archdemon laugh for the first time in her life, the girl pulled back slightly. She decided to pretend that she hadn’t seen anything.

“So someone filched his research, or one of the experiments ran away from him?” she said. “It’s not quite enough to trust the guy.”

“Oh? Then why did you answer the summons? You could’ve just ignored it like the other Archdemons.”

The girl laughed as if her little prank had been exposed.

“I wanted to see for myself what kinda guy was using his name.”

“And what did he look like to your eyes, my sweet lady?”

“About that...” she started with a sigh, still fidgeting with her pendant. “If he’s a fake, I guess he’s pretty close to the real thing? But he was super young.”

The man she’d known had looked well over eighty. However, the man who’d brazenly gathered these Archdemons looked like he was in his midtwenties at most.

But he had that air about him. He’d had an overwhelming presence too, even if not quite as strong.

“That’s but a trifle to me,” the old man said, adjusting his top hat and shrugging. “He values my skills highly, and I’ve been rewarded sufficiently.”

The old man pushed back his frock, revealing an old sword at his waist. It looked like an antique, but due to diligent maintenance, there was no rust on it, nor was the hilt frayed in any way. Seeing this, the girl raised an eyebrow.

“Hey, that’s mine...”

“No. You failed to retrieve it from Shere Khan, my lady.”

It was called a Hex Katana, a weapon used by a group called seraphs a

thousand years ago. Depending on how it was wielded, it could even surpass the power of a Sacred Sword. The girl had once had it in her collection but had parted with it after a trade the other day with a certain Archdemon.

She couldn't hide her grimace. *I didn't find it on the battlefield, meaning they recovered it instead.* After hearing of Shere Khan's death, she'd obviously gone to retrieve it but hadn't found it. To think it would fall into this man's hands, of all people. She was trying to look for an opening to take it back when the old man started muttering.

"In any case, what kind of trade did you make to let go of one of your precious treasures?"

"It was nothing."

The girl reflexively gripped her pendant. Her second name was Collector. She owned countless treasures. Her methods weren't always peaceful, of course. She'd stolen and killed for them too. Despite this, she'd traded the Hex Katana and several Hex Blades, all treasures of great value. It made sense for anyone to have an interest in it.

I was a little curious about Shere Khan's work.

She hadn't been the slightest bit careless. She was used to being resented. It was only normal for someone to betray her in an ambush. It was supposed to be impossible to get past her guard. But even so...

"Huh?"

The girl looked down at her chest curiously. A transparent blade was sticking through it. It appeared to have true substance. Red droplets ran down its length and dripped off its tip. If not for that, she wouldn't have even been able to identify it as a blade.

The girl knew that this was the Hex Katana's blade. She didn't feel any pain. She hadn't even felt the impact of being pierced. She couldn't even feel it inside her. Her defenses, capable of blocking a demon's attack and even a dragon's breath, had been penetrated like a flimsy curtain.

"Wh...y...?"

Her voice came out weakly. The transparent wet blade slipped back out of her body. Hearing a sound like cracking glass, she knew something inside her had been definitely broken.

“Gah.”

Heat surged up her throat, and she could no longer breathe. She couldn't speak. Blood spilled from her mouth and nose, but she still managed to turn and stretch out an arm.

“You...bas...”

She shot a small sphere from her hand, It was about the size of her little finger but was a terrifyingly dark shade of black. It was the color of malice, one that made the sorcery she'd used against the demon look cute. Color wasn't even the right word for it. This was a void. It was as if light didn't exist in that space, like there was a hole in the very world.

“Gh!”

Seeing this, the old man's composure vanished. He immediately swung his transparent sword but only managed to lightly graze the girl's chest.

Darkness burst.

The tiny sphere swelled up to the size of a hut, swallowing everything it touched. No, the sphere itself hadn't grown. It simply looked enormous because it had even devoured the light around it.

“Ooooooh?!”

The sphere pulled everything in. Pillars of water shot up from the lake and were sucked in with the light. And as the darkness consumed everything, only the girl's body fell in the other direction toward the surface of the lake.

The old man turned his blade to swing again, slashing at the core of the darkness as his top hat flew off, cutting the sphere in two. The darkness shattered with a sound akin to the very world cracking apart.

“How terrifying. If not for the Hex Katana, I might've died.”

He landed on the ground with a light tap. There was no bridge there anymore. The stone bridge had transformed like a distorted lump of clay. It hadn't been

broken. It hadn't been melted by heat. What kind of power could twist its form like this?

That wasn't the full extent of the destruction either. Earth and sand started dirtying the once-clear stream of the canal. Perhaps the water vein had been pierced too... No, the crust had broken, starting the process of sinking this town into Suflaghida. This was the end of the town.

One exchange of blows was all it took to wipe a town from the map. That was what it meant for Archdemons to clash.

"She lives up to her name of having the strongest single strike of any Archdemon."

This had been the outcome of a counterattack put together on the spur of the moment too. How much destruction could she have wrought at full power? The old man looked around, but he couldn't spot her anymore. She'd apparently been washed away by the now-muddy stream. It would be difficult to pursue her. He could trace her mana, but that was also why he couldn't follow her.

The sorcery she'd used had been a sphere the size of her little finger. It was close to impossible to spot something darker than darkness in the dead of the night. Just leaving one of those things behind in her path was enough to kill the old man. He couldn't give chase.

He picked his top hat back up, dusted it off, and couldn't hold back a smile.

"In any case, I get it now... That is the reason you gathered treasures, hmm?"

He'd seen what she'd been hiding when he'd taken a slash at her chest. He put his hat on and vanished beneath a veil of darkness.

"Until we meet again, my lady."

Several hours later, Paralynia was completely submerged.

Chapter II: It's Better to Clean Up Quickly or It'll Just Get Worse

"E-Eek! What've we done to deserve this?!"

An overturned carriage, burning cargo, men armed with axes, and injured civilians running in a panic crowded the area. A merchant carriage had come under attack on a small mountain path and one of the assailants, a bandit, was now screaming pathetically.

"Shut it! You're the idiots who attacked us! Don't go actin' like goddamn victims!"

A boy with scarlet hair and eyes was lifting what appeared to be the bandits' boss by the collar. He wore simple leather armor and striking gauntlets, making him look like one of the bandits. However, there was an honest light in his eyes that screamed that he hated all crooks.

"Hex Arm Asura is the one who gave you your last rites!" the boy screamed in rage, reeling back his fist. "Carve that into your thick skulls!"

"Wait a sec!" the bandit yelled desperately. "We're not doin' this 'cause we want to!"

"Huh?!"

"We used to work to the south in Kianoides, but then this mean-lookin' sorcerer beat the shit outta us just 'cause he thought we were an eyesore... We had no choice but to work here instead! It's not our fault! It's all the sor—gah?!"

The boy—Asura—slammed his fist into the bandit's face and chucked him aside. He then ran over to the merchants and asked, "You okay, gramps? Sorry, all your stuff got burned up even though I was taggin' along..."

"Don't worry about it; I'm fine. Not much can be done about a surprise attack from a sorcerer."

Asura had been hired as their bodyguard, but the bandits had still attacked them and the cargo had caught fire. Asura slumped his shoulders, and the merchant laughed.

“It’s nothing. The carriage is fine. Besides, if we hand these guys in, we can collect their bounties. We’ll actually make a profit!”

“Gramps...!”

Incidentally, a sorcerer in the employ of the bandits had been the one to start the fire and had also been the first to taste Asura’s fist.

After confirming that none of the merchants had been seriously injured, Asura noticed the daughter of one of the merchants approaching him. She was just about the same age as him.

“H-Hey, Asura. Won’t you stay with us after we reach Raziel? We can rest easy with you around...” she said with feverish eyes.

Asura shook his head and replied, “Sorry. Like I told ya, I’m lookin’ for someone.”

“Um, Ashy...was it?”

“Damn straight! She’s blunt and stubborn, but she gets lonely real easy. I ended up leavin’ her on her own once, so this time I wanna be there by her side!”

Even as he maintained a carefree smile, a small vein popped up on his brow.

That damn Ashy! She just up and abandoned us the second the fightin’ finished!

Half a month had passed since Asura had fought Azazel’s spawn at Alshiera’s request. He’d chased the culprit who’d abducted the woman named Nephteros but had lost track of them. Then, before he knew it, the seraphs he’d been helping were gone too. Naturally, the bats who’d guided him to the battlefield had vanished as well.

I don’t even know where that ass Bato went.

This was the world a thousand years past the point he’d live in. Thus, he didn’t know left from right. He’d had no idea where he’d been abandoned and

no idea where Alshiera was. There were probably clues to be found in the town where her son lived, but unfortunately for Asura, he didn't remember any details other than that it was a large town.

If he'd at least remembered it ran alongside a canal, he could've found his way to Kianoides. Unfortunately, this boy was really bad at remembering things. As a result, he'd wandered around with nothing more than Alshiera's name to go by and had ended up in the company of these merchants he'd rescued from another set of bandits.

Turns out Raziel's the biggest city in the area!

The boy hated anyone who lived a crooked life, yet here he was running in a straight line in the entirely wrong direction.

"I-I see..." the girl mumbled dejectedly. "I hope you find her."

"Yeah! Thanks!" he replied with a grin.

The girl smiled, unsure whether she should feel happy or sad.

"Hey, Asura!" one of the merchants yelled. "Give us a hand here. We're gonna flip the carriage back over."

"Sure thing! Leave it to me!"

And just as he ran over to the carriage...

"Eek!"

"No'ody moo a muffle!"

A scream and disjointed roar resounded through the air. One of the bandits Asura had defeated was back on his feet and holding a blade to the girl's throat.

"You bastard!"

"E-Ey ow. No fuwwy ideas. Dis l'il la'ies 'ead'll go fryin', you 'ear?"

"Tch..." Asura groaned. The bandit had a broken jaw, and it was taking him everything he had just to hold his axe. Asura was more than capable of smacking the axe out of his hand before the bandit could make a move. It would be a gamble if he could do so without injuring the girl, however.

"C'mon! By dat cawiage! And 'en... Uh, uhhh..."

The bandit's actions had been so impulsive that he had no idea what to do himself. Asura was trying to think of a way to distract him when suddenly, his brow shot up.

“Oh...?”

Behind the bandit, from the road leading south, he saw a boy walking toward them. He looked to be about the same age as Asura, so he seemed somewhat young to be traveling on his own, but there were two swords dangling from his waist that suggested otherwise. The boy's eyes widened at the scene before him, but he quickly hardened his resolve and reached for his swords. Seeing this, Asura provoked the bandit to draw his attention.

“Hey, you! Let the girl go! Don't you have any pride as a man?! You hate me, yeah? Then come and get me fair and square!”

“Ha ha ha ha! Wha' a dumass! Wha' kinda hool wud le' a—”

“You'd be wise to release her. I'll show no pity to scum who use a girl as a shield.”

Asura saw a sword sticking through the bandit's face, but only for an instant. The only wound marking the man's face was the one he'd suffered from Asura's punch. The boy who'd stopped by had simply put his hand on his sword. He hadn't even drawn it. Nevertheless, the bandit turned pale and trembled violently.

Asura whistled in admiration and thought, *Wow, he got him cowering in fear using only his threatening presence. Not bad.*

The bandit had surely sensed his impending doom. And so, he continued trembling and raised both his hands, releasing the girl.

“Hah!”

The boy behind the bandit chopped the bandit on the back of the neck, rendering him unconscious. The girl leaped forward into Asura's arms, and the merchants made sure to tie up all the bandits.

Facing the newcomer, Asura held out a hand and said, “Sorry 'bout that. You really saved us.”

"I only managed because you drew his attention," the boy replied with a troubled smile, shaking Asura's proffered hand.

After confirming the boy's features, Asura's brow shot up once more.

"Hmm... Black hair, silver eyes, and two swords at that... I prolly know you."

The boy smiled in return as if he was also faced with an amusing situation.

"What a coincidence. Scarlet hair and eyes, as well as strange mana in your right hand. I've heard stories about you."

"So we prolly heard of each other from the same guy, yeah?"

"That's likely the case."

"Then lemme go a round with you!"

Asura laughed cheerfully, let go of the boy's hand, and clenched his fists.

"Wh-What's going on, Asura?" one of the merchants yelled in confusion.

"Didn't he just save us?"

"Sorry, gramps. This is a matter between men."

"I don't believe I have any reason to fight you, though," the boy said, grimacing.

"My name's Hex Arm Asura!" Asura yelled, thrusting his finger at the boy.

"And I'm gonna steal your woman!"

"I see..." the boy said, narrowing his silver eyes. "In that case, I'll accept your challenge."

He then smoothly drew his two swords, smiled, and continued, "But I'm pretty strong, just so you know."

"Heh heh, it ain't fun any other way," Asura replied, slamming his gauntlets together. "Oh, one more thing. Lemme get your name. Ashy never told me what it was."

"Unfortunately, I have no name to give..." the boy answered, hanging his head in thought. "Just call me Silver-Eyes."

"Silver it is!"

“I’ve heard the stories, but you really don’t listen to others, do you?”

Hex Arm Asura and the Silver-Eyed King—heroes from ages past resurrected in the present—inevitably clashed upon their sudden encounter.



“This is the Nephilim town, huh?”

The town was located northwest of Kianoides, in the middle of a forest that ran along a river. It was hidden from sight even from across the river by more trees, and there were no roads that led to it. Perhaps because of ores beneath the earth, the magnetic fields here were distorted, so one couldn’t even properly grasp their own location with a compass. After several days of wandering aimlessly in the forest, it was possible to find the town, but it would be difficult to survive in the area that long.

Foll looked up at the cluster of buildings that had suddenly come into view through the trees. She wasn’t wearing her usual clothes. Instead, she wore something akin to a military uniform with a black motif that was made of sturdy thick fabric. Her top was a black jacket with crimson embroidery, and there was a wine-red ribbon tied over her chest. Her skirt flared gently with thick pleats, and she wore a golden chain around her waist. However, either because it was a somewhat loose design or because it didn’t actually fit her, her hands were completely hidden in her sleeves.

Foll let out a deeply moved sigh as she appreciated her new clothes.

He knows me so well.

Zagan had prepared these clothes for Foll... Well, the actual design had come from Manuela, but that was beside the point.

“What’s this?” a voice behind her asked. “Looks more like a ruin than a town, doesn’t it? Milady, you sure people live out here?”

It was Dexia, her arms folded and her brow knitted. She had a longsword dangling from her waist and her braided hair was tied up with a red ribbon hanging over her right shoulder. Another girl tugged on Dexia’s short skirt as if to cheer her up.

“Sis, you’re being rude. The little lady is one of the Archdemons.”

That was Aristella, who was acting rather timid. She had her hair braided the same way as Dexia, but hers dangled over her left shoulder with a blue ribbon. The one other key difference between them was the two scimitars dangling from Aristella’s waist.

Their expressions were different, but they shared the same face, just like Nephy and Nephteros. They were twin Nephilim—or to be more precise, they were girls who’d been created for the sake of reviving Lisette Dantalian. Their clothes were also prim and proper uniforms that closely resembled Foll’s. They weren’t as ornamented as what Foll wore, their main feature being the large golden buttons on their jackets. The two hadn’t really owned any proper clothes to begin with, so these outfits had been prepared to match Foll’s, since they were acting as her attendants. Dexia had shorter sleeves, while Aristella’s went all the way to her wrists and she even had gloves. Thanks to that, it wasn’t a problem to tell the two apart.

Initially, Dexia had shown some reluctance, but upon being informed that Manuela had picked these out, she’d changed into them with surprising obedience... Something had likely happened to her in that store. Foll sympathized with her and decided never to ask about it.

Perhaps because she was unfamiliar with her new clothes, Aristella seemed more anxious than usual. Seeing her little sister like this, Dexia bit her lip and put her hand to her chest.

After being cured, Aristella isn’t the same person Dexia knew.

Foll didn’t know what kind of girl Aristella had originally been, but she came to that conclusion upon seeing Dexia’s state. Aristella didn’t remember that she’d served Shere Khan or what she truly was. Nevertheless, she still remembered her own name and that Dexia was her big sister. That was the one connection between the Aristella of the past and of the present. Foll wanted to do something for them, to help them, but she didn’t have the power to do so.

Dexia smiled as if it was nothing and petted her little sister’s head.

“It’s okay, Aristella. She’s not gonna be offended by how I speak.”

Dexia glanced at Foll, who nodded as if that was perfectly obvious.

“There’s no need for you to be so tense, Aristella,” Foll replied. “You two are my precious subordinates, so I’ll protect you.”

“Y-Yes...my lady.”

Aristella looked at Foll and smiled somewhat shyly. Foll nodded at her two attendants to get them to feel more at ease, then returned her gaze to the ruins. It made sense for Dexia to be puzzled about it being a town. The stone houses were covered in moss and ivy, making it quite clear that they were pretty old. Foll sniffed at the air to get a whiff of the area.

“Probably two or three hundred years old? Maybe older,” she said.

“Hmm. Are there a lotta ruins out here?” Dexia asked.

“Dunno. I’ve never heard of any.”

After another two months, it would be a year since Foll had been adopted by Zagan. In all that time, she’d never heard of ruins being just a half day’s ride away from Kianoides. With the group at a standstill, a carefree voice called out to them.

“Hey there, glad you made it, our dear little Archdemon Valefor.”

“Andrealphus.”

He wasn’t even wearing Anointed Armor now and was instead lightly dressed with nothing eye-catching on him aside from a sword belt. Foll could hear Dexia gulping behind her, probably due to some sort of acquaintance.

“I don’t mind if you just call me Andre, ya know?” he said with a resigned smile.

Foll gave him a small nod, then gazed at the town once more. Despite being a ruin, the buildings were well-preserved, with quite a few of them being used exactly as they had been. There had been appropriate maintenance done, of course, and some buildings appeared to be brand-new. The doors and windows all looked pristine, whereas the sporadic red roof tiles were somewhat misshapen.

Nevertheless, these roof tiles had apparently been put in place from what had

already been there, and the well and waterway looked as if they'd been left as is. Foll couldn't spot any buildings with signboards or the like. What kind of town had this been...and why had it been abandoned?

"What kind of ruins are these?" she asked frankly.

"Oh? Nobody told you?" Andrealphus asked with a confused look on his face.

"Nope."

At the very least, Zagan hadn't told her what kind of place this was. Thus, he probably didn't have the full details either.

Andrealphus groaned, folded his arms, and said, "Hmmm... Can I really talk about it?"

He gave it some thought for a few seconds, then gave up and started talking once more, saying, "I guess it's irresponsible to keep quiet and ask you to protect the place... Keep it a secret that I blabbed, okay?"

That piqued her interest. Was it something even a former Archdemon had to be wary of disclosing? Foll listened attentively and nodded.

"Three centuries ago, a certain group tried to create a country here."

"A country?"

In that day and age, where the church ruled, there were still technically countries, but the word was reduced to nothing more than a way of referring to the local geography...with one exception.

It was a different matter when an Archdemon-class sorcerer used the word, though. By establishing their authority, creating laws, and spreading their influence both inside and outside their borders, an Archdemon possessed the strength to make that possible. But throughout all history, the only one to actualize that was the island country to the east, Liucaon, which had only been possible with the powerful backing of the Three Holy Treasures and Alshiera.

Foll ruminated over the meaning of that word, then asked, "So an Archdemon created this place? Or someone with equivalent power?"

"Aren't you a clever one? If you figured out that much, then perhaps you know the answer already."

Foll cocked her head and mumbled, “Hmm...? An Archdemon-level sorcerer who created a country. Three hundred years... I-It can’t be.”

Foll knew of an incident that perfectly fit that description.

“This is the capital of the oppressed,” Andrealphus answered sorrowfully. “It is the country Fairy Queen Titania tried and failed to create.”

Nephy’s mother, Titania Nimueh Oberon, had tried to create her own country to safeguard elves and other rare species. At the time, Shere Khan’s rare species hunts had already brought many races to the verge of extinction and Liucaon had been too far away to take them in. As such, they’d needed a place like that on the continent itself.

“But one of the Archdemons didn’t like the idea, so they ended up clashing.”

That was how she’d become Archdemon Orias.

“That Archdemon’s second name was Calamity—and he was a sorcerer who manipulated plagues. Titania killed him, but the plague he unleashed at the very end surpassed the bounds of sorcery and became a curse. Apparently, even a high elf’s power couldn’t heal it.”

“Granny...” Foll mumbled as she clutched her hand in front of her chest. She couldn’t even imagine the regret Titania felt about that incident. The ones who’d lived here had definitely been Orias’s family. Thus, Foll understood why she’d kept this place hidden from everyone...as well as how. Nephy’s mysticism could manipulate the forest, which this very much was, so no matter what sorcery was employed, nobody could reach this place besides Orias. She’d likely spent the last three hundred years maintaining the place. That was why, despite being a ruin, it was still in such good shape.

“Something about the resurrected Nephilim probably resonated with her. When I discussed taking these guys in with her, she readily offered this place up.”

“I see...”

This was now a place Foll had to protect at all costs. With that new thought in mind, she headed toward what appeared to be the town’s central plaza.



I wonder if everyone will forgive me for handing that place over...

Orias gazed out at the Holy City Raziel as she thought about the metropolis that had once been her home. She wasn't wearing her robe like she had been when she'd stayed at Zagan's castle but was instead clad in gallant Anointed Armor and in the guise of a young woman. This appearance was more convenient when visiting the church headquarters, after all.

"What's the matter, mother?" Nephteros asked.

"It's nothing," Orias answered, shaking her head before turning around. "Sorry for making all of you come with us."

Nephteros, the new Archangel Richard, Stella, and Ginias were right behind her. They were in the front plaza of Raziel's grand cathedral, the church's headquarters. The cathedral's towers appeared to pierce the heavens, and they were decorated with gorgeous statues and stained glass windows. It was probably one of the most beautiful structures on the entire continent.

The cathedral was basically an open space all the way up to its ceiling, so any usable rooms were actually around it. Orias's group had just walked out of the cathedral's basement. That was where a round table with twelve seats could be found, a room that only the Archangels were allowed to enter. That was where the Archangel meeting had been held just moments ago.

"This is actually fun for me, Oberon."

Stella clasped her hands behind her head and smiled cheerfully as she walked out of the gloomy room and into the sunlight. She wasn't even wearing Anointed Armor, and her uniform was wide open at the collar. Lord Kaltainen had roared at her about being so sloppy.

Orias called herself Oberon when in this form. She hadn't explained this to Stella, but Stella went along with it anyway. It was never exactly clear what went through Stella's head, but she wasn't thoughtless.

I suppose that's to be expected of Zagan's older sister.

"L-Lady Stella, you're being very rude to Lady Oberon," Ginias said in a fluster.

“It’s quite all right,” Orias replied. “She’s my son-in-law’s older sister. Please continue looking after them.”

“Of course!” Stella answered with a carefree smile.

“I still don’t believe it,” Ginias muttered, holding his hand to his head. “To think Lady Oberon has a daughter as old as her...”

His eyes were fixed on Nephteros throughout the conversation.

“Well, she *is* pretty small right now,” Nephteros replied.

This being church headquarters, Nephteros was also dressed in a church uniform. Orias was a little shorter than Nephteros in her current form. She honestly looked younger than her daughter, so the two looked more like sisters. Unsure how to react, Nephteros took the arm of the young man standing next to her.

“More importantly, isn’t the main event today Richard’s inauguration as an Archangel?”

Everyone turned to the young man, who was still in his early twenties. This had been a formal meeting, so his blond hair was tied up neatly in the back and his Anointed Armor was that of an Archangel rather than a standard knight. Richard blushed as Nephteros tugged on his arm.

“N-Nephteros, we’re in public.”

“Huh...? Shouldn’t you be glued to my side at all times? You’re my knight now, aren’t you?”

On this day, Richard Flammarak was officially acknowledged as an Archangel by the church. One month ago, Archangel Valjakka had died in battle against Archdemon Shere Khan and Richard had come into possession of his Sacred Sword by circumstance. A rank-and-file Angelic Knight now had a Sacred Sword without any deliberation by the cardinals, so it had been quite the controversy. That uproar had finally come to an end...or rather, it’d been cut down by Oberon and the Archangels. He wasn’t just any Archangel, after all.

“The protection of Lady Oberon’s daughter. Certainly, it is a duty worth dedicating a Sacred Sword to,” Ginias said.

That was the reason Orias had gone out of her way to visit Raziel in person. As Oberon, she was the only artisan capable of making the church's Anointed Armor. Her daughter was none other than Oberon's successor. To the church, Nephteros was the future. Orias had refused a guard for herself, but normally, it was only obvious for the church to dedicate someone to the role.

This was enough of a reason on its own. But then, it was also backed by an endorsement jointly signed by Ginias, Stella, Chastille, the Juutilainen brothers, and even the missing Raphael—half of all the Archangels—so even the cardinals couldn't object. Well, the meeting had already created quite the ruckus due to the fact that Oberon had a daughter at all, and only about half the Archangels had been in attendance. With all that, it hadn't been that hard to push Richard's appointment as an Archangel through.

In short, Orias had used the full extent of her authority to make a rightful excuse for her daughter's lover to remain by her daughter's side. She might've taken her role as a doting parent a *little* too far.

Orias hadn't given birth to Nephteros. Regardless, Nephteros shared the same blood as Orias's daughter, meaning she was also Orias's beloved daughter. Thus, she could surely be forgiven for being an overly doting parent when it came to her beloved daughter's first love... If they didn't allow her that, she would've cut all ties with the church.

Stella had had the most fun during the meeting. She'd been the one to dub this position "Nephteros's knight."

"Yup, yup," Stella said with a big smile. "If you don't show off to everyone, nobody will be convinced."

"Lady Diekmeyer, please stop teasing us..." Richard replied.

Nephteros cocked her head curiously upon hearing that.

After taking a deep breath, Richard took her hand and said, "Nephteros, I will always stay by your side and protect you. However, between the two of us, you hold a much higher status. So, when we're before others, you should refrain from giving me such special treatment."

"You're unmistakably special to me, though..." she said with upturned eyes.

“Hngh...”

Faced with such direct affection, even Richard recoiled a little. Nevertheless, he was a gentleman, so he gracefully bowed shortly after.

“Nephteros, you should learn from Lady Chastille...though perhaps not to that extreme. At the very least, so long as you’re within the church, you should make a clean distinction between private and public affairs.”

Chastille’s differing demeanors when dealing with private and public affairs was basically at a level of distinct personalities. The thought had Richard correcting himself on the spur of the moment.

Hmm, this young man is rather capable...

Watching the two of them, Orias let out a sigh of admiration. Had Nephteros done that to her, Orias would’ve buckled at the knees. Archdemon Zagan wouldn’t have been able to withstand the same from Nephy either. Yet here, Richard had withstood it with a simple stagger. What’s more, he’d even accepted her affection and returned it. No person with an average force of will could pull that off.

Even so, Orias was in for more of a shock than that...for after that preface and a short pause, Richard brought his face closer to Nephteros’s ear.

“Above all else, keeping a distance in public makes being together in private all the more fulfilling,” he whispered.

Nephteros’s ears snapped to attention and her face flushed red after she heard that.



“As such, please be patient,” Richard added, brushing his fingers through Nephteros’s silver hair and giving her a kiss.

Orias froze, her eyes widening in shock. The surprise was so tremendous that her white hair blew back as if struck by the wind.

I was right to leave Nephteros to him.

Feeling tears coming to her eyes, Orias tried to brush them off with a quiet, “Oh my...”

Stella whistled in admiration, whereas Ginias’s mouth flapped open. Nephteros’s golden eyes darted about in confusion, and after a short while, she nodded slightly.

“Got it... Um, I’ll try.”

“Yes. Let’s both hang in there.”

Orias squinted and endured the pounding of her heart as she watched her daughter’s innocent figure.

“But how should I act in public then?” Nephteros asked timidly.

“Let’s see... The distance we put between us before should be fine. Like back when I worked for Lady Chastille, I mean.”

“Like before...”

Ruminating over those words, Nephteros suddenly covered her face.

“Wh-What’s wrong?” Richard asked.

“I...don’t really remember how I acted around you before all this.”

She hadn’t really been conscious of him as a member of the opposite sex back then, after all. As such, she didn’t remember how she’d interacted with him at all.

Too embarrassed to keep watching them, Ginias tried to change the topic.

“B-By the way, Lord Flammarak, I’m afraid I don’t know much about you. Getting ranked sixth right from the start, I assume you have some skill, but how strong are you, actually?”

Sixth put him at just about the average among the Archangels. Having said that, the gap between first and twelfth was fairly wide. If the twelfth-ranked Lord Salvarra were to have ten bouts with the first-ranked Ginias, Salvarra wouldn't score a single hit. Against Stella, who didn't really know how to hold back, it was questionable whether Salvarra would even get the chance to fight given ten bouts. It was only natural to assume a newcomer was getting some kind of favorable treatment to secure the sixth rank right away.

"I'm not sure how to answer that," Richard said. "I still can't stand against Lady Chas...Lillqvist, I suppose?"

"That's about right," Orias agreed with a nod. "As you are now, you'd score a hit in one of three bouts at best."

"Isn't scoring a hit on Chastille an amazing feat?" Nephteros asked.

After Valjakka's death and Raphael's disappearance, the rankings among the Archangels had changed. Chastille was currently third, while Ginias and Stella were first and second respectively.

"It is," Orias answered with a smile. "In truth, you could've been given a slightly higher rank..."

They'd already forced quite a lot in this meeting. If they'd given him a higher rank to boot, they wouldn't have been able to hold back the surge of objections.

"You overestimate me, Lady Oberon," Richard replied.

"Oh? I don't believe I do. You can hear your Sacred Sword's voice, can't you?"

Both Ginias and Stella looked gobsmacked upon hearing that.

"In other words, you can converse with your Sacred Sword?" Ginias asked to be sure.

"Huh...? Well, if you can call her talking to me of her own accord a conversation, I suppose so," Richard answered with a bitter smile, placing a hand on the Sacred Sword at his waist. "Camael is pretty moody, so she doesn't necessarily answer when I try to talk to her."

"It seems you think of this as normal," Orias replied with an amused smile.

“As far as I’m aware, Ginias is the only one who can converse with his Sacred Sword to that extent.”

That was one of the reasons Orias had favored him. Richard was agape at this fact.

“You’re a knight who’s been acknowledged by me, Zagan, and above all else, Camael,” Orias added with a chuckle. “Have more confidence in your abilities. I wouldn’t have left Nephteros to you otherwise.”

“I-I’ll exert myself to the best of my meager abilities!”

The group continued walking, coming out of the plaza and arriving at a snug little restaurant. Three familiar faces awaited them at one of the tables.

“Oh, sis. Welcome back. Are you done with work?”

“Yup. All done, Lisette.”

The first to call out to them was Lisette, the girl who shared the same face as Dexia and Aristella, both of whom had remained behind in Archdemon Palace. She was wearing something like a scholar’s outfit. Having seen Shere Khan’s last moments, she’d decided she would start learning about the world. Right now, she was attending a school in Raziel while under Stella’s patronage. The other two at the table with her were an old man and a young cait sith.

“Sorry for intruding on your father-daughter time,” Orias said, walking up to them.

“Don’t worry about it. So little has happened that it’s almost anticlimactic,” Raphael answered, taking a sip of his tea. He was wearing a noble-style shirt and jacket, a neckerchief draped over his lapel. He looked like a noble on a pleasure trip but for his armored left arm and the scars on his face. Even the waiters refrained from approaching him.

“Yes. I hope we helped Lisette relax a little,” the cait sith added, nodding in agreement.

This was Kuroka, Raphael’s daughter, and her outfit matched his, so instead of the native clothing from Liucaon she usually wore, she had a dress more like Alshiera’s. It didn’t fit with the cane standing next to her, but the dress suited

her well.

Most people feared Raphael upon first meeting him, but for whatever reason, Lisette had accepted him right away. Well, he was quite clearly a good person, a fact that was readily apparent after a little conversation. “How did things go?” Kuroka asked.

“Everything went off without a hitch, I’d say,” Orias answered. “You two came up, but it seems they haven’t grasped your location.”

“I’m pretty sure we stand out quite a lot, though,” Kuruoka said with a bitter smile on her face, looking down at herself. “I guess it went just as Zagan said.”

“The church probably wants to refrain from prodding you carelessly. At the very least, things won’t develop to the point where it’s dangerous for you.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Hey, hey, Oberon, can I ask you something?” Stella cut in cheerfully.

“What is it?” Orias replied, sounding curious.

Stella donned a mischievous expression, then asked, “From your perspective, who’s the strongest here?”

Orias sank into thought and mumbled, “Hmm... That’s a difficult question.”

“Aha, sorry to put you in a bind...but your eyes are the most trustworthy judge here.”

Stella had likely felt inadequate during the battle with zombie Orobas and Azazel. Orias could see this from how she’d accumulated more strength since then. Having said that, the power Raphael had used to cut Orobas was a head above all the Archangels. In all likelihood, he was a fair bit stronger than Ginias, even.

What’s more, it’s about time for my losses to start outpacing my wins...

Orias served as Raphael’s regular training partner and it was already at the point where she couldn’t defeat him without using celestial mysticism. He was quickly approaching her level of strength.

But if I had to decide on who the strongest is...

Orias's eyes were fixed firmly on Kuroka. Sure, she'd borrowed Shax's power, but this girl had cut down Archdemon Andrealphus in a direct confrontation. If she and her father worked together, they could easily bring down at least one Archdemon. And just as Orias was about to point at her, a voice called out to the group from behind.

"Aaah! You're that seraph from back then!"

Orias turned around...and her eyes shot open at the unexpected sight before her. She spotted a familiar face. He was Asura, if she remembered right. This was the boy who'd helped during the battle with "Nephteros." But that wasn't why Orias was so surprised, as there was another unfamiliar person next to him as well.

"Someone you know?" the mysterious boy asked.

"Damn straight! Dunno her name, though... Uhhh, Ashy's mom pal!"

"Asura... Can't you think of a better way of referring to her?"

"Silver! You worry 'bout crap like that all the time and you won't ever become a great man!"

The boy next to Asura shook his head. He had black hair and silver eyes—features that greatly resembled Zagan's. Orias could almost sense it on her skin. A bead of cold sweat ran down her cheek when Asura hurried over to her.

"Hey, you! You're Ashy's friend, so you've gotta know where she is, yeah? I've been lookin' for her this whole time."

Asura looked desperate and even had tears in his eyes, but Orias's focus remained on the black-haired boy.

"Stella. To answer your question...*he's* the strongest," she said, pointing at the boy.

"Sure looks like it..."

She could tell at a glance. This was the second generation's Silver-Eyed King, after all. Orias had been informed that he'd helped Zagan at the end of the battle. Zagan was unaware whether he'd made it out alive, but here he was, perfectly healthy. Stella had also sensed something strong in him.

“I don’t get what you’re talking about, but you’re wrong,” the boy said, sounding confused. “He’s stronger than I am.”

Asura crossed his arms and puffed out his chest. Orias and Stella were positively shocked.

“Damn straight! I did beat you and all!” Asura yelled cheerfully.

This apparently had nothing to do with the Silver-Eyed King holding back. Now that Orias thought about it, during the battle with “Nephteros,” Asura had ward off a spear of light, and even though his fist had shattered, he hadn’t bent a knee to the very end. There was no doubting his strength.

The black-haired boy was clearly stronger than Orias. She wouldn’t go as far as to say it wouldn’t even be a fight, but it was pretty close to impossible for Asura to defeat him. So then, how could such odds be overturned? Before long, Orias came upon the name of the miracle required to so casually overcome those odds.

I see. So that’s a hero?

He’d wielded such power in the battle against “Nephteros” too. Had Orias and Nephy been on their own, they would never have reached her.

“So? Do you happen to know where Alshiera is?” the black-haired boy asked, unable to stand the attention he was getting. “It’s a little embarrassing, but we’re lost. If possible, I’d like you to tell us how to get there too.”

“That’s the gist of it! Please and thank you!” Asura exclaimed and nodded, brimming with confidence as his arms remained folded in front of him.

Orias was starting to get a headache, but she mustered her willpower and got to the point, saying, “I do know where she is...but aren’t you two her friends? Did she not come out to greet you?”

Alshiera was actually a person who excelled at looking after others, so she wasn’t the type to abandon her friends, who were completely clueless in the present day and age.

“I swear, she’s the same as always,” Asura answered with a shrug. “That damn Ashy. Whenever she’s got a promise she doesn’t wanna keep, she goes

into hidin'."

"A promise? I find it hard to picture a promise that would have Lady Alshiera running for cover."

"Ha ha, it's no big deal," Asura replied, rubbing his finger beneath his nose. Then, he continued his speech without a hint of shame. "She just owes me a date once I get back!"

The air froze.

Huh? Wait, isn't that boy next to him Zagan's father...?

In other words, he was Alshiera's husband. Nephteros, Stella, Kuroka, and Raphael all figured out the situation. Everyone was stiff with splendidly stern expressions on their faces. Lisette yelped quietly, whereas Richard gulped due to the alarming atmosphere. As for the husband in question, he was just standing there with a troubled smile gracing his lips, which made things even more confusing. Only Ginias was oblivious, and he had a similar smile on his face.

"I assume you two are also related to Archdemon Zagan?" Ginias asked. "You seem rather skilled, and everyone around him says the same sort of thing."

"Huh? Her son's the same? Man, what a hopeless family."

Well, Zagan was, in fact, similar to Alshiera, but that wasn't the problem here. The first to crack under the pressure was Nephteros.

"Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Oh? Wait, you're the one we fought! Well, looks like you're fine now! That's great!"

"Huh? Oh... Um, thanks for the other day...?"

Nephteros didn't actually remember any of it, but she'd been told that a boy named Asura had taken part in the battle alongside Nephy, Chastille, and Orias.

"No, wait, that's not the point. Isn't that person there...Zagan's father?"

"Sure seems like it, yeah!"

He knows, but he's still acting like this?!

Everyone was now far past bewilderment. Now, even Ginias had a grasp of the situation, so he too was left speechless.

“Um, isn’t that...improper?” Nephteros asked, timidly turning her eyes to the black-haired boy.

“I said the same thing,” he answered with a shrug. “If it’s going to get awkward, it’d be better not to have me around...”

At least he appeared to have a proper head on his shoulders. His gloomy expression was almost pitiful. And yet, Asura cocked his head curiously.

“But Ashy wants to see you too, yeah?”

“Ah...!” the black-haired boy gasped, seeming astonished.

“No point goin’ on a date if we ain’t gonna have fun, yeah? So you come talk to her too, Silver. I can wait ’til after!”

It was hard to tell whether this boy was thinking things through or not thinking at all. Unexpectedly, Kuroka was the first to laugh at the scene.

“You should give up, Silver-Eyed King. He’s probably the type of person who’s driven purely by emotion and instinct,” she said. There was an air of resignation to her voice, as if she clearly saw someone else overlapping with this boy.

“There’s no logic to it, but in most cases, their instinct is correct... I have a friend who’s very similar to him, so I can tell.”

“See, she gets it!” Asura exclaimed with a carefree smile. It was questionable whether Asura really got it, though.

In any case, it looked like there was nothing for Orias to worry about.

“Lady Alshiera should be in Kianoides. We’re heading back there after this, so if you’re headed that way, we can guide you.”

After a moment’s hesitation, the black-haired boy nodded and said, “Please bring us to her.”

With their work complete, Orias’s group made their way back home to Kianoides—bringing an outrageous storm with them.



In Kianoides's enormous underground cave, inside the ex-Archdemon Marchosias's castle—Archdemon Palace—Alshiera had no way of knowing that she was in the center of a maelstrom.

“This is far harder than I imagined.”

Nephy was in this castle as well, making a grim expression in a room on her own. Because Zagan wasn't staying in his own castle, Nephy was also using a room here instead. Having said that, their regular home was back in that forest. This was more of a guest room, so the decorations felt somewhat cold to her. Showing such a room some love would surely have been the sign of a top-class housekeeper, so in that sense, Nephy realized that she still had a lot to learn.

Even Zagan hadn't expected Nephy to become an Archdemon. Sure, she'd been receiving lessons in sorcery from him, but she was still a novice who'd only started learning less than a year ago. Even in celestial mysticism, she knew she was far behind her little sister, Nephteros. Now that her sister had a perfect body, her power might've even surpassed Nephy's. Both as a sorcerer and as a high elf, Nephy had a lot to learn. In other words, she was the weakest among the new Archdemons. Thus, she simply had to get stronger.

Nephy had several grimoires spread out on the desk before her, as well as several items unrelated to sorcery—like a fig fruit and a mistletoe branch. Performing sorcery was like following a sophisticated numerical formula. Magic circles made up of defined circuits activated to fulfill an exact purpose. But in contrast, celestial mysticism was the logical opposite. It worked entirely on prayers. By using symbols and herbs or the like to inspire oneself, it brought miracles to life from the heart. Nephy was learning these two diametrically opposed concepts at the same time, so she felt like she was being driven mad.

“The way it's accomplished is different, but you're essentially doing the same thing.”

That was what her teacher and mother, Orias, had casually told her once, but if that was all it took to be able to pull it off, Nephy wouldn't be having any trouble. Well, sorcery and celestial mysticism both grew in power with proper training, so in that sense, Orias was right. By immersing oneself in literature, sorcery grew stronger. By increasing one's understanding of prayers, celestial

mysticism grew stronger. Drenching herself in cold water first thing in the morning and burning dizzyingly strong incense to train her spirit made celestial mysticism far more troublesome to learn, however.

Still, Nephy was capable of this type of work on her own. Actually, there was a point in doing it on her own. That was exactly why Nephy was all by herself. She knew this was necessary. She understood, but...

“Haaah...”

She let out an involuntary sigh. At such times, the only ones she could consult were her mother or little sister, but neither of them was present at the moment. They had both gone to Raziel. Nephy’s best friend, Chastille, was taking care of a crisis of her own, so she wasn’t really in a position to give Nephy any advice either.

There’s that matter with Lord Barbatos, after all...

In all likelihood, Chastille was destined to go through the most trouble out of anyone in the near future. It made more sense for Nephy to be supporting her friend, so she knew she couldn’t possibly bother Chastille for advice.

Nephy wanted to gain the ability to support Zagan. He’d relied on her in the last battle, and he’d accepted her inheritance of the Sigil of the Archdemon. Thus, she’d finally reached a point where she could stand by his side. That was exactly why she had to get stronger. She knew this, but she couldn’t keep her melancholy concealed.

“Tee hee hee, that’s quite the gloomy face you’re making, Lady Nephy.”

Nephy raised her head upon hearing that unexpected voice.

“Lady Alshiera?”

Countless bats swarmed together out of nowhere...and the vampire then appeared in the middle of the room. Nephy rose to her feet in a fluster as Alshiera curtsied.

“Excuse me for the shameful display, mother.”

“Oh my, I’m the one who was peeping,” Alshiera replied with her usual bold smile, holding her creepy stuffed doll in her arms as if it helped calm her heart.

“Worried about something?”

“You see through everything, don’t you?”

“Not everything, I’m afraid,” she responded, her smile turning bitter.

Nephy found her very similar to Zagan in that regard. Silence fell over them. Alshiera had hit the nail on the head, but remained quiet all the same. Even though she knew what to say, she found it hard to actually do so.

“Um—”

Just as Nephy was about to speak, Alshiera raised her voice and cut her off and said, “I might be of some use.”

“Truly?” Nephy asked, wide-eyed in wonder.

“I’ve watched this world for over a thousand years now. Is there anyone more suitable to resolve your worries?”

“But why...?”

Nephy knew she’d be better off simply accepting Alshiera’s help, but this felt far too sudden. Alshiera cast her eyes down in hesitation before giving Nephy a troubled smile.

“You refer to the likes of me as a mother, so...can’t I think of you as a daughter too?”

Nephy felt a tight squeeze in her chest and spontaneously pulled Alshiera into an embrace.

“Hwah?! Wh-Why are you hugging me?!”

“Um, you just looked so cute...”

“Cute?!”

After finally releasing the shocked vampire from her grasp, Nephy waved her hand to pull a chair toward her.

I can finally use this manner of sorcery without a magic circle’s aid...

Yes, it had taken her this long to acquire such elementary sorcery. As a sorcerer, she’d only just arrived at the stage of being average. She was nowhere

close to the likes of Foll or Shax, or even former Archdemon candidates like Barbatos or Gremory.

“I believe I understand what’s been bothering you,” Alshiera said.

“You most likely do.”

That was to be expected of the ultimate vampire who’d lived for a thousand years...and of Zagan’s mother. However, her mother-in-law’s knowledge was precisely why Nephy felt like she could open up about what was in her heart. Thus, Nephy gripped her skirt tightly and spoke just as Alshiera did.

“It’s about sera—”

“I want Master Zagan to hug me tight again!”

Alshiera’s expression froze, half-smiling and half-shocked.

“What?”

“Huh?”

Nephy hadn’t caught what Alshiera had tried to say. Had there been some kind of discrepancy? Nephy cocked her head as Alshiera gave a strained smile. The vampire pushed a hand into a swarm of bats, trying to find some way to calm down, then pulled out a cup of tea—one she’d likely taken from the kitchen—and brought it to her pale lips.

“Don’t mind me...” Alshiera mumbled, her voice calm. However, the constant ripples in her cup showed how clearly shaken she was. “So...you want him to...hug you?”

Nephy nodded slightly, then replied, “Um...back when Master Zagan appointed me a critical task, he granted me a tight hug before seeing me off. It really raised my spirits.”

It was more like he’d pulled her into his embrace rather than really granting anything... He’d done it on the spur of the moment, but having him go as far as rubbing his head against her had granted Nephy tremendous vigor for the battle to come. It was because of that act that she’d managed to fight to the end.

Simply remembering it was embarrassing, so Nephy covered her face with

both hands. Her pointy ears turned bright red to their very tips, though, so there wasn't much of a point to that.



“I-Is that so...?” Alshiera muttered, retaining her smile and suddenly finding herself unable to back down since she’d already offered to help. “Can you not simply ask for another? I’m sure the boy would gladly comply.”

There was no chance Zagan would ever refuse Nephy. But unfortunately, Nephy had no idea how to ask. If she attempted to say such a thing straight to his face, she would surely faint before getting to the end of her request.

“I-I can’t... That’s far too embarrassing.”

Alshiera’s smile twitched as if to say, “Still, after all this time?” but Nephy didn’t notice.

“Besides...it feels a little too immodest...” Nephy added.

“How exactly did he hug you?” Alshiera asked, taken aback by that statement.

It had been extremely bold, by Nephy’s standards.

But I want to get a nice, tight hug...

If she couldn’t, she at least wanted some head pats. Nephy felt like Zagan would figure it out if she simply loitered around nearby without saying anything, but that was part of the problem. Right now, he was buried in work. It was difficult to call out to him when he was always either in a staring contest with documents in the throne room or getting reports from his subordinates. When he wasn’t busy with those matters, he spent his time locked up in Naberius’s workshop. Two Archdemons were working together to create something, so even Nephy could tell that it was no trivial matter.

But thanks to that, I’ve been able to dedicate myself to my studies.

That was why Nephy’s frustrations had only been aggravated while spending time on her own.

“I-It wasn’t anything untoward!” Nephy replied, shaking her head vigorously. “He just, um, hugged me and rubbed his forehead against me...”

“Oh, that’s all...?” Alshiera said with a sigh of relief.

“What do you mean, ‘that’s all’?”

Now it was Nephy’s turn to be taken aback. From her perspective, being

fawned over like that had been an experience on an unheard-of level. How could it be expressed as “that’s all”? How exactly had Alshiera lived her life?

“Um, did you do such things with your husband like it was no big deal?”
Nephy asked.

“Hwuh? Me?”

Alshiera had never expected this conversation to be turned around on her. She jolted backward, chair and all, then placed her cup on her knee and cocked her head.

“Hm... Now that you mention it, I don’t remember doing anything of the like.”

Nephy reeled upon hearing that shocking truth, then asked, “Did you not have any interest in such things?”

“We spent less than a year together, after all,” Alshiera replied with a faint smile. However, upon seeing Nephy gulp, she brightened her expression and added, “There’s no need to look like that. It’s already been a thousand years.”

There was no regret or sorrow in her voice.

“It was a short but happy time,” she added. “He really lived for my sake and loved me.”

“Mother...”

Alshiera took another sip from her cup, then let out a sigh of resignation.

“In the thousand years since, I’ve never felt love like I had back then. However, it was because of that love that I managed to flounder my way this far. So, really, it was more than enough for me.”

Even if she did fall in love again, her partner would surely die before her. It would end that way even if the world was at peace. How could she experience love again under such circumstances? Unable to endure the thought, Nephy took Alshiera’s hand.

“I’ll bring you happiness, mother!”

“Pfft!”

Tea burst from Alshiera’s mouth, making Nephy believe that she had phrased

that a little poorly. Seeing her mother-in-law break into a violent coughing fit, Nephy gently stroked Alshiera's back.

"Do you even know what you're saying?" Alshiera asked.

"Forgive me. Um, I'm happy right now, and I'll continue being happy, so, um..." Nephy trailed off, unsure what she was even trying to say anymore. And yet, she cut forth with determination. "We will never leave you alone again, mother."

It was often said that a sorcerer's life span could reach a thousand years. Now that they were all Archdemons, Nephy, Zagan, and Foll could remain by Alshiera's side.

Alshiera's eyes opened wide upon hearing that and she replied, "I see. In that case, you'll certainly make me happy."

"Augh..." Nephy groaned, then started blushing, and Alshiera bumped her forehead against hers.

"You meeting that boy has been the greatest blessing of my life."

"Mother..." Nephy mumbled. Her ears turned bright red right to their tips as she continued speaking. "Um, I said we'd stay with you, but we're still only at the dating stage, so..."

"Oh? Is that really so?"

Alshiera shot Nephy a curious glance, as if she found this a true mystery, whereas Nephy found herself unable to say another word.

"Tee hee hee... In any case, you look a little more cheerful now," Alshiera said.

"Oh, that's, um... Thank you."

Having given voice to her discontent, Nephy's frustration had cleared up a little.

"Now then, I really should be checking up on how Foll is doing," Alshiera said, rising from her seat.

"Yes. Please do take care of her," Nephy replied with a quick bow.

Alshiera turned around, and out of earshot, she whispered, “I actually wanted to discuss something else with you, though...”

“What was that?”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing.”

Alshiera shook her head, then vanished into the middle of a swarm of bats.

“I’ll have to try my best so that she can relax as well!”

And with that, Nephy returned her focus to her desk and picked up her pen.



Foll had arrived in the center of the capital of the oppressed’s plaza. Having been guided there by Andrealphus, she stood in a historic ruin where the Nephilim had been awaiting her.

“Wow...” she mumbled, then reflexively arched back in awe. There were people of all races, from humans to therianthropes to avians, and even long-extinct races like unicorns and brahmas. The majority were men, but there was a sizable portion of women as well.

It looked like they were all present, making it impossible for her to see everyone. With her height, the wall of people surrounding her made her feel like she’d been buried inside a well.

“Wa wa wa...”

Dexia and Aristella were taller than Foll, but still short compared to adults. They faltered, grabbing each other’s hand and pushing their shoulders together in the moment. The Nephilim had likely come to check what kind of Archdemon Foll was. She felt a mix of curious and anxious eyes staring at her.

They all look strong.

They were around Dexia and Aristella’s level or perhaps a little stronger. She now understood why they were too dangerous to leave at large yet were in danger of vanishing if left alone.

“From this point on, this is your domain,” Andrealphus said in a carefree manner. “The rest is up to you.”

“My domain...”

This was hers now, much like Kianoides belonged to Zagan. She ruminated over what that meant as Andrealphus turned around and addressed the crowd of Nephilim.

“Ladies and gentlemen...this here is our queen. Try not to do anything stupid, okay?”

He said that, but Foll looked no older than ten. Would the Nephilim truly accept her? She readied herself for any reaction...when suddenly, the Nephilim each bent a knee and lowered their heads as one.

“We are all aware of the battle you fought. We pay the greatest of respects to the Wise Dragon’s daughter.”

There was no falsehood in their words. They looked sincere. There were, of course, those who appeared somewhat reluctant, but it looked like the vast majority of them had accepted her. Still, a certain thought rose to the forefront of her mind.

They don’t see me as daddy’s daughter, but father’s.

That was the obvious path toward the Nephilim accepting her, but Foll felt like it was wrong. Zagan and Orobas were both fathers to her in equal measure. In her eyes, neither was more precious than the other. There was no way of comparing them due to the separation of past and present, but if there was one thing she wished for regarding the two of them, it’d be to see what kind of conversation they’d have together.

“Wanna say something to them, little lady?” Andrealphus asked, cocking his head.

“Mmm!”

Foll nodded, then looked around restlessly. She had a better view now that they were all kneeling, but it was still hard to see the back rows, and she knew her voice wouldn’t project well like this. Having said that, there were only tall buildings in the area that weren’t suitable for climbing on top of. She could use her wings to fly, but...

“Something wrong, milady?” Dexia asked.

With that, Foll came up with an idea and stretched out her arms.

“Dexia, shoulder ride.”

“Huh?”

“Quickly.”

Foll urged her on, so Dexia reluctantly got down and passed her head under Foll’s skirt.

“Why do I hafta...?”

“Do your best, sis.”

“Ugh...”

Despite her little sister cheering her on, Dexia gave up and straightened her posture with Foll on her shoulders. Despite her appearance, Dexia was a top-class sorcerer. Thus, her delicate body was sturdy and she showed no signs of staggering even with Foll’s weight atop her.

“Oooh...”

Now that she was higher, Foll could see much farther. This was how Zagan usually saw the world. Back when she’d turned into an adult briefly, she hadn’t been this tall. Despite having long decided not to reach beyond her means, having such a high vantage point felt good.

Dexia grimaced beneath her in a somewhat disrespectful manner, but Foll couldn’t help but smile proudly. Lured by the sight, the Nephilim also smiled and narrowed their eyes.

Foll gave her chest a good thump to settle her soaring emotions, then lorded over the Nephilim with steely determination. After that, she took a deep breath and addressed them all.

“My name is Valefor! I am the Archdemon in charge of your lives!”

Surprised by her loud voice, Dexia swayed a little, but Foll kept speaking.

“I believe I understand exactly how you feel. However, though I am Wise Dragon Orobas’s daughter, I am also Archdemon Zagan’s daughter.”

That declaration had the Nephilim astir with anger and bewilderment. After waiting for them to quiet down, Foll continued her speech.

“I grew strong thanks to Orobas, but the one who made me an Archdemon, who gave me the power to protect all of you, was Zagan—the very same Zagan who killed many of your brethren.”

“M-Milady...!” Dexia whispered reproachfully from below. However, Foll simply shook her head and brushed Dexia’s hair. She knew she couldn’t leave something like this unsettled. If she did, it would one day reach the point of no return.

“If you’re willing to accept me regardless, then I invite you to join me. Do so and I will never abandon any of you.”

Zagan or Nephy probably would’ve been able to cook up a better speech, but this was Foll’s way of doing it while staying true to herself. That was why she took this approach, even if it invited backlash.

The Nephilim didn’t react immediately. They were all confused. If it was an option, they would have remained there with their eyes averted forever. But then, among all the murmuring Nephilim, one boy rose to his feet.

“I’ll go with you! We need help to live in this era!”

It was a boy with what looked like a horn growing from the left side of his head.

A carbuncle? It’s my first time seeing one.

Carbuncles possessed something akin to a crystallized jewel in their bodies from birth. These jewels possessed great mana, so the race had been hunted since antiquity and was now extinct.

“You serious, Shura?” another Nephilim asked.

“Yeah!” the boy yelled, then turned to Foll. “You’re telling us who you are, but not telling us to swear our allegiance to Zagan or anything, right?”

Foll nodded, prompting the carbuncle boy to turn to face the other Nephilim.

“In that case, I want to believe in her since she’s reaching a helping hand out to us!”

Following the boy named Shura, another man stood up and declared, “Then I’ll tag along with you too. I’ll believe in the fact that you understand our feelings.”

With that, the Nephilim rose to their feet little by little...until eventually, all of them showed their intent to obey Foll.

“That’s quite the thin ice you’re treading on,” Andrealphus said with a judging smile. “Zagan’ll probably be pissed, ya know?”

“He’ll understand. He said he’d leave this to me, so I’m sure he won’t object.”

“Ha ha, you’ve got a point there.”

Once the noise died down, Dexia lowered Foll to the ground.

“Don’t get my heart racing like that again,” she complained.

“Mmm... Sorry for scaring you,” Foll said.

“I-I wasn’t scared or nothing!” Dexia exclaimed, turning bright red.

“You were really cool out there, sis,” Aristella said with an awkward smile on her face.

“R-Really?”

More satisfied with her little sister’s praise than she would have let others believe, Dexia was now red to the cheeks for an entirely different reason.

In any case, for the time being, the Nephilim had accepted Foll. The little dragon let out a sigh of relief, but then a voice suddenly resounded from afar.

“This is bad! Someone get over here quickly!”

It appeared Foll’s first big job wasn’t going to be so easy.



“Um, milady? Why are you riding my shoulders again?”

“This is absolutely necessary. Hang in there, Dexia.”

“Ugh...”

After being guided by the Nephilim, Foll had taken a seat on Dexia’s shoulders once more.

“It seems the little lady has taken a liking to that spot,” Aristella said from Dexia’s side, the corners of her lips curving lightly.

They were currently at the canal that continued all the way to Kianoides. The water flow was far more violent than usual, so a rumbling resounded through the area. There hadn’t been any rain the previous night, but the water looked muddy too. The currents had shaved away at the banks, making any footholds near the edge liable to crumble. It would have been dangerous for even a sorcerer to get swept away by this. Inside the raging canal, they spotted several stone and wooden fragments too.

“Looks like something happened upstream. If the water rises more than this, it’ll overflow. It’s probably a good idea to evacuate the locals, but...” Andrealphus trailed off. It was questionable whether there was actually somewhere for the locals to evacuate to.

“Andre, how much has the water level risen?” Foll asked.

“About five or six meters. Suflaghida is upstream from here, but it’s still weird that it rose this much in one night when it didn’t rain at all. It’s possible the main dam broke or something.”

Suflaghida was the biggest lake on the continent. Its water provided for a quarter of the entire landmass’s populace. If its dam was broken, the rivers coming from it would flood in no time.

“Can you investigate upstream?” Foll asked Andrealphus.

“I should be able to figure out something in an hour or so.”

“Then please do. Dexia, let me down.”

Dexia lowered Foll to the ground, looking somewhat relieved to finally be freed from the duty.

“What’re you gonna do, milady?” she asked.

“Temporary measures. All of you, step back a bit.”

Andrealphus hummed in admiration. There wasn’t much a sorcerer could do about a disaster of this scale. It could be temporarily brought to a stop, but that was very difficult to maintain, so the most they could really hope for was to

alter the flow. But to the people who had nowhere to go, changing the flow would be an act of destruction. So then, what could Foll do? The others backed up as she placed her hand on the ground.

Nephy or Nephteros would be way better at this kinda thing.

Mysticism was far more suited to this scenario than sorcery, but neither option was present, so Foll had no choice but to do something about it herself. Thus, she took in a shallow breath to calm down before continuing.

“Marbas, Orobas, lend me a hand.”

At her command, two dragon heads manifested at her shoulders.

“Earth Splitter.”

Three voices spoke as one...and soon, the ground shook.

“Whoa!”

“What the hell?!”

Voices of bewilderment came from the Nephilim as the earth rose beneath them, making the riverbed sink. By the time the shaking stopped, the water level had lowered by about ten meters.

“Wh-What did you do?” Dexia asked in a fluster.

“Pretty good. Made a levee, did ya?” Andrealphus answered with a whistle.

This was normally sorcery meant to split the earth open and swallow one’s enemy. Using it, Foll had created an improvised levee.

“The average sorcerer can create the same thing given a few months,” Andrealphus explained, putting his hand to the ground. “However, terrain changed by sorcery gets brittle once the mana supply’s cut off. This here ain’t like that, though.”

“What do you mean?” Dexia asked.

“Sorcery to modify the terrain, sorcery to get it to stick, and sorcery to make fine adjustments to both of those. The little lady here used three totally different ones at the same time. Even among all the Archdemons, I’m pretty sure only one or two could pull this kinda stunt off.”

“How is that even possible? And on this scale...?”

Foll’s levee continued both south and north as if bisecting the entire forest. Dexia finally understood what had been accomplished here, so she was left wide-eyed and speechless.

“What’s more, this ain’t even your specialty or nothing, right?” Andrealphus asked Foll.

“Nope.”

“Ha ha... Gives me the chills just imagining what you’ll be like when you’re bigger.”

“You’re amazing,” the carbuncle Nephilim—Shura, if Foll remembered right—joined in with a laugh. “Looks like it was the right choice to come along.”

“Heh heh...” Foll chuckled. It honestly felt good being praised. She smiled triumphantly before cocking her head and continuing, “Why aren’t you opposed to me at all? You didn’t look bothered even when I talked about Zagan.”

She was glad he believed in her, but unconditional trust was worrisome in its own way.

“How do I put it...?” Shura started, smiling bitterly as if recalling an unpleasant memory. “It’s ‘cause I’m one of the guys Zagan beat up directly...”

“Huh...?”

“I figured if swords were no good, I’d try using martial arts to kick him, but he caught my foot and crushed it. Still, after that, when everyone went crazy, we were fine. Only the guys Zagan beat up directly were unaffected, so...”

He couldn’t put the rest into words, but they’d realized the truth by now. They’d all been saved by being defeated.

“It annoys me to be in his debt, and I can’t bring myself to thank him, but because of that, I feel like I wanna be of some use to you. Is that...a lousy reason?”

“Nope. Not bad. I like it.”

It would probably take more time for them to find their answer, but in their

own way, all the Nephilim were trying to accept Zagan.

For now, that's enough.

If they were willing to compromise, the day would surely come when they would all come to an understanding.

“Hey! Someone’s unconscious over here!” a Nephilim who’d been checking out the state of the canal suddenly shouted.

Foll turned to face them and spotted a collapsed figure halfway up the levee. They’d likely been pulled out of the canal when Foll had modified the terrain. She ran over to them.

“Ah—!”

Seeing the silver hair splayed across the ground, Foll gulped, thinking it was Nephteros. A moment later, she realized it was someone else entirely and immediately calmed down. Lying there was a girl who looked around fifteen or sixteen. Her mud-smeared skin was white like bloodless wax. No, it was more blue than white. And unfortunately, it was questionable whether she was actually alive.

“She’s still breathing,” the Nephilim who’d found her said, bringing Foll back to her senses.

“She’s...a sorcerer?”

Having been in a muddy stream, her clothes were a mess, but her robe and amulet looked like those of a sorcerer. However, it looked like her misfortune went beyond having been swallowed by these currents. There was a large gash running across her chest that appeared to have come from a sharp blade.

Did someone cut her down?

It was clear that something had happened upstream. She’d either gotten caught up in things or was related to the incident itself.

Andrealphus then caught up with Foll, and upon taking in the sight, his eyes widened slightly.

“Hey, ain’t that...Asmodeus?”

Dexia gulped and replied, “Asmodeus? You mean *that* Asmodeus...?”

“Yeah. One of the Archdemons.”

Foll pulled up the glove on the girl’s right hand, revealing the Sigil of the Archdemon beneath.

“Is she a carbuncle?” Shura asked.

A crimson gem was embedded in the center of the girl’s exposed chest. However...

“It’s no good,” he continued. “Her core jewel is broken... She’s beyond help.”

The crimson gem was cracked. Foll didn’t know much about carbuncles, but this jewel was likely something akin to a heart to them, so losing it was the same as dying.

An Archdemon was killed? By whom?

“This is pretty good luck, depending on how you look at it,” Andrealphus said. “I mean, Zagan was hoping for one more Sigil.”

Zagan had wanted a Sigil to give to Barbatos. This girl was still alive, but the most Foll could do for her at this point was watch her final moments. After that, it would be necessary to retrieve her Sigil. That was when Foll noticed that the girl had something clenched in her now half-gloved hand.

“That’s...”

Foll picked it up. It was a pendant, or more specifically, a locket. It was protected by sorcery, so the inside was perfectly clean. A portrait of two sisters who shared the same hair color rested within it. One of the two was this girl. The one who appeared to be the older sister was hugging the younger one from behind. The two of them appeared to really get along and were both smiling happily.

But carbuncles are extinct, meaning this girl is definitely...

“I’m going to save her,” Foll said before she even knew it.

“Give it up,” Andrealphus rebuked. “Her second name’s Collector—she’s one of the worst Archdemons. You’re not gonna get any thanks for saving her. Hell,

you never know what she'll steal from you if you do, get me?"

He then pointed at the jewel in her chest and continued, "Besides, there's no saving her no more. A carbuncle's core jewel can't be fixed with sorcery. I mean, hell, even if you do fix it, nothing happens."

"Why?"

"It looks like a jewel, but they say it's a crystallization of their souls. Even if you fix the physical container, the soul is still broken. With some research, maybe someone could've found a way to treat this, but the carbuncles died out before that happened."

In other words, the only way to heal her was to use a technique that repaired the soul.

Even Nephy's celestial mysticism probably only has a fifty percent chance of working here...

And even if it could, this girl would die before they could bring Nephy here from Archdemon Palace. It would have been possible for Barbatos to bring her over right away, but he was probably outside of the shadows right now and Foll had no means of contacting him. Plus, there wasn't any guarantee that Nephy could save her to begin with.

After fretting over the matter for a bit, Foll turned to Aristella. Even after losing the majority of her body, the girl was still alive.

If it's possible to repair the soul, then we might be able to turn Aristella back to normal too.

As such, Foll stood up and removed her right glove.

"Lend me your power—Eye of the Archdemon."

At her call, a tremendous gale of mana gushed out from her Sigil.

"The Sigil of the Archdemon? What're you planning?" Andrealphus asked.

"I'm saving her. I don't know her, but I don't know the Nephilim either, yet I said I'd save them. It'd be hypocritical of me to abandon her."

And above all else, Foll truly wished to save her. That was all there was to it.

Sorcery and celestial mysticism aren't enough right now. They can't repair a soul.

However, if a carbuncle's core jewel was a crystallization of its soul, then in its case a soul was equivalent to physical material.

It should definitely be possible to repair this jewel.

Zagan's silver eye was capable of seeing the flow of mana...and Foll's draconic eyes possessed the same power. What's more, the Eye of the Archdemon that Bifrons had left behind was best suited for "seeing" the truth of the matter, much like its name implied. In that case, Foll could pull this off.

"Heaven's Scale Prayer's Shell."

Thus, with the desire to save this girl in her heart, Foll unleashed Zagan's power.

Chapter III: Every Villain Was Once Innocent

“Hey, sis, what do you even plan on doing after you learn sorcery?”

The girl puffed out her cheeks, complaining to her older sister who no longer played with her and instead chose to engage in staring contests with grimoires day in and day out. These two carbuncles were members of a rare species that had star crests deep in their eyes.

“Why don’t we go pick flowers instead?” the little sister asked, plucking a white lily from the garden and putting it up to her silver hair. “Look, isn’t it pretty?”

The girl’s attempt to get some attention had her older sister looking up from her grimoire as if beaten down by her persistence.

“Yeah, yeah. It suits you.”

“Come on, take a proper look. Is that stupid book cuter than me?”

“I know how cute you are better than anyone else,” she replied as she patted her little sister on the head to comfort her, then proudly stuck a finger upward. “Your big sis will become a sorcerer and gather a whooole lotta treasure.”

“Treasure? What kinda treasure?” the little sister asked curiously.

“Let’s see... I guess gems and stuff?”

“Uhhh, how about you not gather gems?” the little sister protested with a grimace. “It’s in poor taste.”

Gems were a part of these girls’ bodies, so even though they found such things very beautiful, it also made loose gems feel like mutilated cadavers. Be they real or fake, it was common sense to stop someone from essentially gathering their people’s skulls. Such was the case, but the older sister wagged her finger about condescendingly.

“What’s wrong with a carbuncle gathering gems? More importantly, humans on the ‘outside’ crave gems. If we hoard them all, nobody will dare defy us,

right?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not gonna happen,” the little sister replied bluntly.

“Why not?!” the older sister yelled, taking her turn to puff out her cheeks. “I said it’ll happen, so it’ll happen!”

Watching her stomp her feet, the little sister let out an exasperated sigh.

“And what good will that do? Are you gonna become a queen or something?”

“Yeah, exactly,” the older sister affirmed nonchalantly. “They don’t really need to be gems. Any treasure will do. If I gather everything, I’ll be a queen.”

It sounded silly, but feeling sorry for her older sister, the girl didn’t say anything and simply averted her eyes instead.

“Uhhh! There’s that face again! You think I’m being stupid, don’t you?”

“I went out of my way not to say anything because you looked so pitiful...”

“You’re awfully cheeky for a younger sister, you know?” the older sister complained with teary eyes. Though, she still regained her composure rather quickly. “If I become a queen, we won’t need to hide in a place like this anymore.”

Carbuncles were targeted precisely because of the gems in their bodies. Even if stealing their core jewel led to their death, the people “outside” didn’t care. The rare species that had star crests even had their eyes gouged out.

The girl opened her eyes wide at that statement as her older sister placed her hand on the girl’s cheek.

“I want to create a kingdom for the carbuncles...” she said affectionately. “No, for all the oppressed.”

She then clenched her fists atop her lap. Just maybe, her eyes were looking further into the future than anyone else as she declared, “No matter how much anyone laughs or makes fun of me, I’m definitely gonna pull it off. That’s why I need the power to make my dream a reality.”

“I won’t laugh...” the girl said, shaking her head and pressing her hand against her chest in shame. “You can do it, sis!”

“Heh heh heh, thanks, Lily,” the older sister replied, her face slackening in a delighted daze.

The girl tucked the white lily into her older sister’s hair. Her wish was as pure as that flower. She knew it couldn’t be done, but she still had the gall to say that she would pull it off.

This had all occurred a hundred years prior to the day Fairy Queen Titania had founded the capital for the oppressed.



“A dream...?”

The girl’s voice came out extremely hoarse, her throat burning. Her body was as heavy as lead, she couldn’t raise her arms, and a wooden ceiling filled her vision. She didn’t recognize the place at all. The smell of the soil and grass felt strangely nostalgic, however.

What...happened to me...?

She was under the impression that something horrible had occurred, but her mind was unclear as if trapped in a misty haze. Perhaps having heard her bewildered groan, someone peered down at her.

“Oh, are you awake?”

It was an unfamiliar face. The boy looked somewhere around seventeen or eighteen and also had a gemlike crystal embedded in his forehead.

“Ah...”

But how? At a glance, she knew he was one of her people, even though she felt like meeting any such brethren should’ve been impossible.

“Gah...”

She tried to sit up, but got a horrible headache. Her vision twisted and she even felt like she was about to vomit.

“You better keep still,” the boy said. “You actually suffered a fatal wound.”

“A wound...? Why...would I...?”

Had she gotten caught up in some kind of accident? She couldn’t really

remember.

“My name is Shura,” the boy said, looking somewhat nervous. “Can you tell me your name?”

“My name...?”

She tried to answer, but nothing came to mind.

Name... My name...?

She couldn't remember. The first thing she thought of was the dream she'd just seen.

“Lily.”

“Lily? Is that your name?”

“Probably.”

“You mean you don't know?” the boy asked with a confused look on his face.

“Sorry...” she said with a hint of guilt.

The boy shook his head and replied, “It's all right. I'm sorry for coming across as forceful.”

It seemed he wasn't a bad person.

“Where am I...?” she asked, looking around the room in a daze.

“Uh, now that I think of it, there isn't a proper name for it yet. It's a little hard to explain, but this place is called the capital of the oppressed.”

“The oppressed...”

For some reason, those words got stuck in her mind.

I feel like it's somehow related to me...

And yet, she couldn't remember anything.

“There's no need to force yourself to stay up,” the boy said with a comforting smile. “You should get some rest.”

“Sure...” she mumbled as she closed her eyes and heavy drowsiness fell over her like a veil of mud.

After confirming that she was asleep, the boy left the room.



“She’s got amnesia?”

Andrealphus was dumbfounded by the contents of Shura’s report. He figured she was unlikely to suddenly attack a fellow carbuncle, so he had left nursing her to Shura, but this was a totally unexpected outcome. They were in the room adjacent to the sickroom Asmodeus was using. The building’s layout was such that leaving the sickroom meant going through here, so they’d taken up positions as a precaution.

Andrealphus was supervising and was accompanied by Foll, her attendants Dexia and Aristella, and Shura, who’d just returned to fill them in on his findings.

“Sorry,” Foll said. “Looks like I didn’t heal her well enough.”

“No, it’s not your fault,” Andrealphus replied. “Even resuscitating her after her core jewel was broken is miracle enough.”

Foll had repaired Asmodeus’s core jewel using Heaven’s Scale Prayer’s Shell, but it hadn’t gone perfectly. Perhaps Foll hadn’t had enough power, or maybe Prayer’s Shell was inadequate to repair the soul.

“Oh man, first Furcas and now Asmodeus,” Andrealphus complained, scratching his head. “Can these Archdemons quit losing their memories already?”

“There’s also the question of who did this to her,” Foll added. “Only an Archdemon can defeat an Archdemon, so I need to find out what happened.”

Andrealphus nodded and said, “I got some information upstream. There was a small town called Paralynia on Suflaghida’s coast, but it looks like it got flooded. As a result, the mouth of the river collapsed and water rushed inland. The church is working on repairing the dam, though, so it should settle down soon.”

As such, there was no need to worry about the canal’s rising water level.

“What about the citizens?” Foll asked.

“I’m sure there’re victims, but it seems most of them evacuated. There was

apparently quite an uproar before the town sank, so the sleeping citizens were already awake.”

“Okay, if anyone else got washed away, help them... I’m pretty sure it’ll be tough at this point, though.”

They’d found Asmodeus just before noon, but it was already evening. A sorcerer could have survived that long, but any normal person would have been far beyond help.

“Let’s get back on track,” Andrealphus said after giving Foll a nod. “The fact that she got washed down this way means Asmodeus is definitely related to whatever happened in Paralynia. Her sorcery can easily destroy an entire town, after all.”

“Who was Asmodeus fighting?” Foll asked.

Andrealphus shook his head and replied, “Mountains of sorcerers have a bone to pick with her, so I can’t even begin to guess.”

“The shape of Asmodeus’s wound makes it seem like she was stabbed by a sword. There shouldn’t be that many sorcerers capable of that.”

Andrealphus sank into thought for a moment before saying, “Well, there’s me...and among the active Archdemons...I suppose Glasya-Labolas is the fishiest. Not only is he extremely skilled with a sword, but he even takes on contracts to kill people.”

“Does he know Asmodeus personally?”

“He’s the kinda sorcerer who lives only for the thrill of the hunt, regardless of any personal connections. There’re times he’ll strike at people after casually crossing their path and times he’ll kill people at someone else’s request.”

It was hard to think of a motive.

“Does she *really* have amnesia?” Dexia joined in, sounding mighty suspicious.

“It sure looked that way to me...” Shura answered.

“I happened to meet her once when Master Shere Khan was negotiating with her,” Dexia said with an annoyed look. “She was really sly and unpleasant. There was no telling when she’d screw us over. You sure she’s not pretending to

have no memories just to get us to lower our guard?”

“Well, she *is* the type to do that kinda thing,” Andrealphus agreed.

“Is Asmodeus that bad a person?” Foll asked.

“I told you right off the bat, didn’t I?” Andrealphus answered. “She’s a total villain. I still recommend finishing her off right now, just so you know.”

Nevertheless, Foll wanted to save her.

“What do you think, Shura?” she asked.

“Huh? Me?” he replied, sounding utterly dumbfounded. He’d probably never thought he’d be asked for his opinion.

Shura folded his arms and thought it over for a while before eventually saying, “It looks to me like her mind’s a mess. She even called herself Lily.”

“Meaning her memories will return with time?”

“It’s possible, so I at least want to watch over her until then... Besides, I’ve heard there are no carbuncles left in the world.”

No matter what she’d done in the past, a part of him wanted to see his people survive.

“I also...want to save her,” Aristella unexpectedly joined in on the conversation, backing Shura up. “Having no memories is very unsettling... Being killed without knowing anything...must be tough.”

“Aristella...”

After seeing her little sister voice her opinion like that, Dexia couldn’t put up a strong front any longer.

“Two for and two against. The decision’s up to you, little lady,” Andrealphus said.

“My answer remains the same,” Foll replied with a nod. “We’re saving Asmodeus.”

“Milady...” Dexia muttered in dissatisfaction.

“I understand that you’re worried, Dexia,” Foll said with another nod. “But

please wait for now.”

“Fine.”

Andrealphus didn't object either. Instead, he simply said, “Well, just be careful. It's about time for me to get back to training my successor.”

“Mmm...”

“Also, you sure about keeping Zagan outta the loop about Asmodeus?” Andrealphus asked.

“Yup.”

Perhaps it would've been better to inform him, but this was her job. As such, Foll simply shook her head.

“I don't want to worry Zagan with unnecessary stuff.”

“Because it's your first job?” Andrealphus asked.

“No, because Zagan's head is already full worrying about Nephy's birthday.”

That was why it was Foll's job to handle things until he could safely celebrate Nephy's birthday. Andrealphus was shocked by her frank statement, but Foll didn't notice.



Around the same time, in Archdemon Palace's throne room, Barbatos and Archdemon Zagan stared each other down. Zagan was seated on the throne with his legs crossed, whereas Barbatos was postured to attack at a moment's notice, even if he had his hands in his pockets.

“How rare,” Zagan said, breaking the silence. “It's not often that you go out of your damn way to visit me in person.”

Any regular message could've been passed through the shadows, so it had to be something important to warrant a face-to-face meeting.

“Fuck off. I'm only out here 'cause you haven't fulfilled your end of our contract.”

Seeing his undesirable friend seethe with rage, Zagan nodded in understanding. Of the three people he'd nominated to be the next

Archdemons, only Barbatos hadn't inherited a Sigil. Zagan had spoken of an opening among the Archdemons as a reward for Barbatos's services in assassinating the Nephilim's officers during the war, so it made sense for Barbatos to claim this was a breach of contract.

However, though Zagan had, in fact, nominated him as one of the next Archdemons, he'd phrased it to Barbatos as turning a blind eye if Barbatos were to steal a Sigil for himself. Thus, he could brush this off as Barbatos's own shortcoming. Still, it was also true that Barbatos had put in extra effort to help save Nephteros.

Zagan spared no expense when it came to rewarding his hardworking subordinates—even Barbatos. From that perspective, Zagan simply had to do something. And so, he sank into thought for a while before Barbatos suddenly lashed out.

"You said you'd give me advice on what the hell I can do for the crybaby's birthday!"

A painful silence spread over the throne room.

"Sorry, I forgot."

Zagan lowered his head. Now that he thought about it, this had been the only reason for Barbatos to join the alliance to save Nephteros. He'd seen that task through to the very end, so Zagan had no choice but to acknowledge his efforts.

"Seriously, my bad," Zagan said, apologizing once more. "It completely slipped my mind until you mentioned it. You have my heartfelt apologies."

Zagan was ashamed of himself. He'd prioritized his own bride's present above all else, to the point that he'd even rushed to kill Shere Khan. Plus, he'd only just decided to back Barbatos and Chastille's relationship as a way of resolving the antagonism between Angelic Knights and sorcerers.

Despite all that, he'd completely forgotten about providing Barbatos with advice regarding Chastille's present. No matter how much of a scumbag Barbatos was and how inconsequential he was to Zagan, this was a matter of morals and virtue.

"W-Well, as long as you get it," Barbatos said, scratching his head awkwardly.

He definitely hadn't expected Zagan to apologize so sincerely. He pulled himself back together and dragged a chair over without asking, taking a seat and leaning back as he crossed his legs and asked, "So? What'd you pick as a present for your bride?"

"Right, I'm making a watch. Nephy's really busy, so I figured it'd be nice for her to have a way to tell time."

"You're making one? By hand?"

"Yeah. I've got a hold of Naberius's weakness and all, so I'm putting him to use."

"Hmm... Handmade, huh...?" Barbatos mumbled, nodding in admiration all the while. "Not bad at all."

"What about you? Do you have anything planned?"

Barbatos grimaced and averted his eyes as he replied, "I haven't settled on anything yet."

"The hell have you been doing...?"

"How can ya even blame me?! Just so ya know, I've never given anyone a present in my whole goddamn life!"

Zagan cocked his head in confusion and asked, "Huh? Didn't you give her a hair ornament for Alshiere Imera?"

"H-H-H-H-How do you know that?!" Barbatos exclaimed, his unhealthy face turning a slight shade of red before he slumped his shoulders. "I mean...I somehow managed to hand it over to her, but it didn't really feel like a present or nothin'..."

"Seriously, what've you been up to...?" Zagan groaned. Chastille had been wearing it pretty much every single day, so it was clear she liked it. Wasn't it fine seeing that she'd properly accepted it?

I planned to entrust this entirely to Gremory, but...

On the other hand, if Zagan kicked this idiot out now, there was no telling what he'd do. At worst, it was easy to imagine Barbatos failing to come up with a present and spending the entire next year acting even gloomier than usual.

Actually, can this guy even hand over a present like a normal person?

Despite being so conscious of his feelings, he still said things like, “I don’t like her or nothin’,” while acting like he suddenly remembered something embarrassing. It was better for him to move past all that, but either his pride or shame was getting in the way. In any case, he was being a pain.

Zagan racked his brain for a while before a sudden thought came to mind and he suggested, “How about getting her something good to eat?”

“Tasty food? Well, I *do* know how to cook, but ya know...”

Barbatos scratched his cheek as if to say, “Oh well, guess I’ve got no choice!” when Zagan suddenly felt like his subordinates’ lives were at risk.

“Stop. Don’t get involved in the cooking yourself. No kitchen in this world will accept you idiots.”

It was bad enough that Nephy had strictly ordered the two of them to never be allowed inside the kitchen. If he let that happen, the harm would surely extend far beyond Zagan’s reach. Kianoides was his domain, so he couldn’t allow such crimes to be committed.

The problem was that the two of them were fatally flawed when it came to food, down to their very sense of taste. It wasn’t that they made bad food, but that they performed proper taste tests and made food they believed was good. They believed this while creating rubbish that would lose out to moldy food scraps in quality. As such, there was no way to prevent any potential casualties aside from banning them from the kitchen altogether.

“Huh? Just so ya know, I can cook better than she can.”

“There’s no point in talking about it when you use Chastille as your measuring stick. You two are peas in a pod. And honestly, you should just gratefully enjoy the food that others make for you.”

“W-We ain’t no peas in no pod!”

That’s not the point!

Zagan nearly punched the man on reflex, but he held back the urge by using all his wisdom as an Archdemon. And with no way of knowing of Zagan’s heroic

efforts, Barbatos folded his arms.

“Sooo...I should just take her to some restaurant?” he asked. He thought it over for a while, then suddenly averted his eyes bashfully. “The hell, man. That makes it sound like a d-date or something.”

Zagan’s armrest shattered.



What the hell else can it be other than a date, you dumbass?!

Zagan somehow managed to swallow the words that crawled up his throat. Had this man forgotten what advice he'd come here for to begin with? That was actually entirely in the realm of possibility, so it might've been a good idea to remind him. It was about time to get Barbatos to acknowledge it as a date and hope for some developments.

But still, this was Barbatos. Making him conscious of the fact posed the risk of aggravating his tiresome mindset, so Zagan had to tread lightly. On the other hand, if left unsettled, Barbatos was liable to spend the rest of eternity claiming he "didn't like her or nothin'." That really didn't matter in and of itself, but Chastille took everything Barbatos said seriously, so there was also a risk of aggravating her mindset as well.

Why do these two love each other when they're both such pains in the ass?

No, wait, perhaps that was exactly what drew them together. Either way, it was tiresome. Zagan just wanted to get this man out of his hair and get back to making Nephy's present. He was getting exhausted thinking about all of this.

"You invite me and my subordinates out drinking all the time, don't you?" Zagan said.

"Well, yeah."

"Have you ever invited Chastille?"

"Huh? Nope, never."

"Won't she feel alienated, then? I bet she wonders why you never take her along."

Barbatos's eyes shot open as if he'd just been punched. It wasn't like he went out drinking with anyone and everyone, and he'd probably never invited any other Angelic Knight either. Still, when phrased like that, it made him feel bad about excluding her.

"Besides, she's of proper drinking age now, right?" Zagan stated, striking while Barbatos was still down and hoping to get him out already. "Won't it be better for you to teach her how to drink before she picks up any bad habits?"

“Wh-Wh-Why do I gotta...?”

“Then tell me, can you stand the thought of another man teaching her how to drink?”

“G-G-G-G-Gah...”

So he really did have some desire to keep her to himself... Actually, that desire seemed particularly strong. Barbatos ruffled his hair in agony, and before long, he gave up and slumped his shoulders.

“Oh well... Guess I’ll look after her. What a handful.”

“You’re the handful, dumbass.”

At least you made a proper decision.

Zagan smiled gently as if to confirm his friendship with this man.

“You picking a fight with me, asshole?!” Barbatos yelled.

“Oh, sorry. I just figured there was no way you’d die from this, so I let my true thoughts slip...”

“What part of this conversation’s got you so pissed?!”

“Every part of it, dumbass.”

Zagan was getting tired of providing advice for Barbatos’s love life. And yet, Barbatos rose to his feet as if suddenly coming to his senses.

“Hang on! What about the crybaby’s present?!”

“I thought we were done with that?”

“Feeding her ain’t no present, right? Don’t I need somethin’, I dunno, more permanent...?”

“Huh? We’re still on this?” Zagan replied sternly, seriously hoping he would just leave. “A present doesn’t necessarily have to be some tangible item, right? A good time will remain in her memories too. The important thing is for her to spend her birthday in a good mood, isn’t it?”

Even then, Barbatos grimaced and said, “She’s gonna give me somethin’ on my birthday. Despite being poor, she’s definitely gonna go outta her way to get

somethin' nice. In that case, I've gotta get somethin' to balance it out, yeah?"

Where did his confidence even come from?

"How the hell do you claim not to love her when you can spout crap like that?"

"H-Huuuh?! That ain't got nothin' to do with it!" Barbatos yelled, bright red to the face.

Zagan was getting tired of this conversation, so he flatly said, "Then how about you just get her monetary goods? Gold works just as it is, and there's no complaining with gems and the like. She can even sell them if she has to."

"Gems... That ain't a bad idea. Oh yeah, you've got some Spirit Blood in Marchosias's treasury, right? Gimme one."

"I don't really mind, but do you plan on giving something that ominous to Chastille?"

"Huh? What, think that's a bad idea?"

Even Zagan hesitated to use one as part of his present for Nephy. It certainly had monetary value, but it was a sort of cursed jewel, so it wasn't really something to give someone as a birthday present. What's more, Chastille was an Angelic Knight, so she couldn't exactly do anything with one.

Zagan had no qualms about giving Barbatos one as a reward for what he'd done, but he needed things to go smoothly between these two, so he had to expunge any possibilities of making it worse.

It wasn't clear how much of this logic he understood, but Barbatos did fold his arms and groan. He then suddenly cradled his knees to his face like he'd fallen into the depths of despair.

"What is it now...?" Zagan asked.

"I don't really get it, but when I imagine her pawning off my present, it hurts like hell."

"Seriously, just leave already..."

Chastille wasn't even the type of person who'd sell a gift to begin with.

“How about asking Chastille directly?” Zagan suggested.

“I wouldn’t be havin’ such a tough time if that was an option.”

It sounded absurd, but even though Zagan was reluctant to admit it, he did understand.

I never managed to ask Nephy about her tastes either...

“In that case, I’ll casually bring it up with Kuroka when she gets back,” Zagan said.

“Huh? Wouldn’t those elves work better?”

“How can we bring up birthdays around Nephy and Nephteros when we’re trying to surprise them?”

“Oh yeah... My bad.”

The two men got along like cats and dogs, but they understood each other perfectly on that point.

“Sorry for getting in your hair. I’ll leave the cat lady to you.”

“Sure.”

Barbatos finally left. After confirming his presence was completely gone, Zagan muttered to the air, “So? How long do you plan on simply spectating, Gremory?”

Gremory came out from the shadow of a pillar. The granny had been watching Barbatos’s eccentric behavior this entire time, yet she hadn’t helped at all.

“It was so much fun!” she said with a satisfied smile, throwing Zagan a thumbs-up. “Nice love power!”

“Shut it!” Zagan roared. He was worried whether they’d really be able to celebrate Nephy and Nephteros’s birthday at this rate. “Look, just make sure those two end up going on a proper date. You can do as you please after that.”

“Understood!”

The granny skipped out of the throne room with light steps. Now that it was finally quiet, Zagan slumped back into his seat.

“I haven’t gotten a chance to check on Foll... I wonder how she’s doing...”

Zagan knew that his daughter was doing her best to aid him. In that sense, Nephy’s birthday had to succeed, but he felt somewhat pathetic having to leave everything to his daughter so that he could focus solely on that event.



“It’s nice to meet you, Lily. How are you feeling?”

Asmodeus sat up in her bed as Foll entered her sickroom. Two days had passed since she’d woken up. She’d regained consciousness here and there on the first day, then had recovered significantly by the second. It was unclear whether her memories had returned, but she looked emotionally stable at least. And as such, Foll figured it was about time to meet her. She’d entered the room a few times already to check on her wounds, but Asmodeus hadn’t been conscious on those occasions. For now, seeing as she recognized herself as Lily, Foll decided to address her by that name.

Aristella also entered the sickroom with Foll. She was here to help the little dragon with tasks that were somewhat difficult for her, like applying new bandages or wiping Asmodeus’s body clean. Foll had actually wanted to bring Dexia along as well, but the room was a little too cramped for four people.

Aristella set down a bucket and towel on the table, and Foll closed the door after getting a nervous nod from Asmodeus—no, Lily.

“I-I’m fine,” she answered. “It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“I see. Still, don’t force yourself to move around, all right? Your wounds were fatal for a carbuncle. I don’t know how things will turn out from this point on.”

It would be nice if she made a full recovery, but it was entirely possible that the wound would reopen.

“Um, where is Shura today...?” Lily asked, her eyes anxiously darting around the room. She likely felt a certain affinity with him as a fellow carbuncle. He happened to be rather kind to her too, so in a sense, he was Lily’s one and only ally.

“I came to check on your wound,” Foll answered, shaking her head. “Shura’s a

man, so he can't come in right now."

"Oh! Y-You're right..."

Seeing Lily's confused expression, Foll realized she'd yet to introduce herself.

"My name's Valefor. I'm the Archdemon who's in charge of protecting this place, so I'll protect you too."

"A-Archdemon...?" Lily repeated, an air of disbelief in her voice.

"This is Aristella. She's lending me a hand. Her circumstances are similar to yours, so I brought her along."

"....."

Aristella was probably also nervous. The two of them exchanged quick and stiff bows, so perhaps the introductions had gone poorly. Silence dominated the sickroom. Foll was somewhat troubled by that fact, but suddenly, Lily let out a sigh of relief.

"What is it?" Foll asked.

"Oh, I just thought you'd be scarier when you mentioned being an Archdemon. Instead, you're a cute little girl... Oh, sorry. That was rude of me."

"I don't mind. It's true that I'm still a child," Foll replied, then adjusted her posture and faced Lily once more. "Show me your wound."

"Oh, right."

Lily was currently wearing a simple dress to substitute for a patient's gown. This made checking on her wound a simple feat, but the far larger reason for it was to keep any magical equipment away from her. Even an Archdemon would be unable to do much with nothing to aid them, after all.

Lily rolled up her dress just as she was told, and Aristella supported her. Foll sat down on the bed...or, well, clambered onto it, then checked her wound. Buried between two womanly breasts—which were far larger than Chastille's, but not quite as large as Nephy's—was a crimson gem.

"Looks like the wound itself has closed, but..."

"Um, is something wrong...?"

Foll tried touching the gem. It had once shattered and still had countless cracks running along its surface. A shining golden substance filled in these cracks. These were the traces of Prayer's Shell. It looked somewhat like those bowls in Liucaon that were artfully repaired with gold lacquer.

Treatment using Prayer's Shell was much like swapping in an artificial body part. However, since the flow of blood carried out the task of regeneration, it also gradually restored the patient's original biology. However, that begged the question: would that procedure work for a carbuncle's core jewel?

Foll explained all that to Lily while continuing her examination.

"Does it hurt?" Foll asked.

"No, I feel fine."

After hearing that, Foll checked Lily's arms and legs, but those wounds had pretty much healed entirely. She'd been covered in bruises and scratches before being brought to this room, but now only Lily's numerous scars remained.

They'd likely been caused by sorcery. There was everything from burns to a deep gash running across her back. It was possible she even had more scars than Raphael.

I can't erase these... Foll thought as she tried touching them, which elicited a troubled smile from Lily.

"I wonder what kind of life I lived...?"

"Does not knowing make you feel anxious?" Foll asked.

Lily shook her head and replied, "When I look at the state of my body, I feel like I'm better off not remembering."

"I see..."

Right now, Lily wasn't the Archdemon who'd lived for hundreds of years. She was just a girl who didn't know who she was, so seeing her own body covered in scars like this must've been unsettling. Foll couldn't find the right words, so instead, she pulled a pendant out of her pocket.

"Here, Lily, take this."

“Huh...? What is it?”

“When we found you, you were holding onto it dearly.”

Foll closed Lily’s fingers over the pendant. Sorcery preserved its interior, but there was nothing else planted in it, so giving it back wouldn’t pose a problem.

Opening the pendant revealed a portrait inside.

“A locket...” Lily said. “Is this...me?”

“I think so.”

“I wonder which one I am...?” Lily muttered, touching the picture of what looked like close sisters. “I’m sure this is something I should never have forgotten, but I can’t tell...”

She squeezed the locket close to the chest, then finally smiled and said, “Thank you.”

It looked like she’d calmed down.

Foll gave her a nod, then shot a glance to Aristella and ordered, “Show her.”

“Yes.”

Aristella didn’t require an explanation. She simply took off her long glove, exposing her bare skin.

Lily gulped as she saw Aristella’s arm, which was transparent like glass. It was the color of Heaven’s Scale itself.

“Aristella is the same as you. After suffering horrible wounds, most of her body has been recreated. The same power that saved her was also used to treat you, so there are many unknowns. Try to stick close to my side whenever you can.”

That was the reason Zagan had placed Aristella by Foll’s side. Prayer’s Shell kept her alive, but it was still in an experimental phase. If something were to happen, only those capable of manipulating Heaven’s Scale—Zagan and Foll—were capable of dealing with it. Until the original cells took over once more, there was no room for conjecture or wishful thinking.

Well, at least I can spend more time outside than Zagan.

Zagan was currently busy with work and couldn't leave Archdemon Palace. As such, he'd placed Aristella with Foll so that she could walk around outside. Foll knew that, so she treated both Aristella and Dexia with great care.

Foll gave Aristella another glance and nodded, prompting the girl to put her glove back on. And then, after thinking it over a little, Aristella spoke up.

"The little lady is simply very calm by nature. She's very kind."

"Hwuh? Um, yes... I think so too."

"Mhm."

The two came to some sort of understanding, and finally released from the tension, they smiled at one another.

"I'm sure your wound will be fine too," Aristella added. "Both she and the Lord Archdemon are outstanding sorcerers."

"Huh, the Lord Archdemon...?"

Lily looked at Foll in confusion. It seemed she didn't remember those details either.

"There are thirteen in total," Foll said, counting them out on her fingers as she went. "In our circle, there's Zagan and Nephy—my daddy and mommy—and a doctor named Shax."

In truth, she'd wanted Shax to take a look at Lily's wound, but he was in the middle of training with Andrealphus. Zagan's deadline of three days was just about over, so it would be pretty hard to get his help right away.

"So there are four of them right here..." Lily mumbled.

"There's one more...but I'm not sure we can count him right now."

Furcas was in possession of a Sigil, but he had no memories as an Archdemon. Actually, seeing how his body had regressed, it was much like Furcas the Archdemon had already perished, so his circumstances were different from Lily's.

Lily cocked her head, then muttered, "Thirteen Archdemons... Eek!"

She suddenly yelped in fear and held her hand against her chest.

“What’s wrong?” Foll asked.

“I-I don’t know, but it feels like something scary happened...”

According to Andrealphus, Archdemon Glasya-Labolas had been the one to cut Asmodeus down. She was likely starting to remember that fact. Lily trembled violently, and Foll pulled a blanket over her shoulders.

“There’s no need to be scared. You’re safe here.”

“...Thanks.”

Foll sank into thought as she rubbed Lily’s back.

Is it better to wait before bringing her to Zagan?

He’d been the one to create Prayer’s Shell, which meant he was the expert on the subject. Foll honestly wasn’t very confident regarding how well her treatment had gone, so she wanted him to give it a look.

“I-I’m okay now,” Lily said, shaking her head. “Sorry for freaking out like that.”

“Don’t sweat it. You’re a patient here.”

“So, uh, who is this one other Archdemon?” Lily asked, suddenly remembering the prior topic.

“Right. A boy named Furcas. He’s a good person, but...”

As her thoughts drifted to the boy who was likely on a warpath toward the one person in his heart, Foll felt a smile form on her lips.



“You’re really amazing, Lilith! I knew you were a princess, but I never heard about you living in a castle too!” Furcas shouted passionately from atop a boat headed for Kianoides.

Lilith had referred to herself as the princess of the succubi every now and then, but she truly had been beautiful in the dress she’d worn at the castle. She was back in her regular outfit now, which was, of course, also magnificent.

Lilith averted her gaze awkwardly upon seeing Furcas’s innocent joy.

“His Highness’s place and Archdemon Palace are both castles too, aren’t

they?” she said.

“That’s true, but it’s different. Also, you really looked like a princess in a dress. You were *really* pretty!”

“D-Don’t say such embarrassing things!”

Unable to stand it any longer, Lilith turned to the side with red cheeks. While holding her hand and grinning like an idiot at her adorable reaction, Furcas felt a sudden chill run down his spine.

“Furcas, aren’t you, like, being too clingy?”

“S-Sorry, Selphy...”

It felt like Selphy had loosened up around him to some extent, but she was still rather strict. Whatever the case, there was a severe solemnity deep behind her calm smile.

Suddenly, another woman with the same hair color as the siren plopped her chin on Selphy’s shoulder. Her entire body was restrained by her clothing, including her arms, which was likely why she used her chin instead.

“Come now, Selphy, you’re being childish,” she said.

“Levia, this is a problem between girls.”

“Furcas is a boy.”

“Then let’s, like, dress him up as a girl. I bet Manuela would totally do it.”

Sensing that a terrifying conversation about him was going on, Furcas shuddered.

Levia closed her eyes for a moment in astonishment, then nodded and replied, “I guess that works.”

“Levia?!” Furcas cried in shock as a large hand fell on his shoulder in sympathy.

“Ha ha... Sorry, Furcas. It’s been a while since Levia’s set foot in her hometown, so she’s in high spirits.”

“Behemoth,” Furcas said, turning to the man who had leather straps binding his whole face, which meant he had never seen what the older gentleman

looked like. “That’s her in high spirits?”

“Yes. Don’t you see how happy she is?”

Behemoth acted like it was the most obvious thing in the world, leading Furcas to take him seriously. He took a good long look at Levia, but her clothes covered her mouth and she wasn’t very expressive to begin with. Thus, he couldn’t even distinguish whether she was angry or happy.

“You’re amazing, Behemoth! You truly understand the person you love!”

Furcas decided not to dwell on matters he couldn’t understand.

“Stop that. We’ve just spent a long time together, that’s all.”

Behemoth actually looked rather pleased about the boy’s honest envy. He sounded rather cheerful as well.

It had apparently been half a year since they had become Zagan’s subordinates along with Lilith. They’d been granted a vacation after the recent incident, so the girls had decided to return to their home in Liucaon, and Furcas and Behemoth had tagged along.

Unlike Furcas, who had just gone along for the ride, Behemoth had skillfully arranged everything from lodgings to the ship. He’d been so efficient, in fact, that Lilith had complained about having nothing to do. Thanks to that, she had been able to relax during the trip.

Behemoth had also dealt with driving off drunks at taverns and had easily chased away any hostile marine life. He was such a reliable man.

“Are Levia and Selphy sisters or something?” Furcas asked curiously.

“No,” Behemoth answered. “They’re related by blood, but...their relation is a little more distant than that.”

“I get it. They’re royalty and all, so they’ve got a whole lotta relatives, yeah?”

“Well...I suppose it’s something like that.”

Furcas cocked his head upon hearing that cryptic answer. Had he asked a question that was difficult to answer?

Meanwhile, the women’s conversation moved to another topic.

“Anyway, I’m glad we got to go back...” Lilith said. “We got to visit the Adelhide village too.”

“Yeah...” Selphy agreed.

The two girls’ other childhood friend, Kuroka Adelhide, wasn’t there with them. The group had visited the cait sith’s hometown while on this trip, even though the village was long gone and only traces of some houses could be seen now. The countless grave markers were the only proof that anyone had once lived there. The two remaining royal families managed the area, though, so the grave site itself was at least maintained properly.

“If only we could’ve brought Kuroka along with us...” Levia muttered languidly.

“There’s no helping that,” Lilith replied. “She needs to stay hidden right now. The port leading to Liucaon is the first place they’d look.”

“So then, she chose to hide in Raziel? I have a hard time understanding what goes through Zagan’s mind sometimes.”

It was unexpectedly effective, apparently.

“Besides,” Lilith added, squeezing her hands tightly in front of her chest, “I think Kuroka needs a little more time.”

“Really? I doubt there’s anything to worry about now that she has Shax.”

“Hmm, is that old guy really that reliable?”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Selphy said, joining in with a carefree statement. “I mean, Shax treats Kuroka, like, really well, don’t you think?”

She sounded utterly confident, as if to say she had tons of experience.

“Hey, if ya don’t push your offense a little harder, she’s gonna get snatched out from under your nose, ya know?” Behemoth whispered, prodding Furas with an elbow.

“Huh...? I don’t really get what you mean, but I’ll do my best!”

“Well, guess that might be good enough as you are now,” Behemoth replied with a helpless smile.

Furcas cocked his head in confusion upon hearing that, but Behemoth shifted his focus to the front of the boat.

“Oh, Kianoides is coming into sight.”

Furcas followed his gaze and saw the familiar sight of the town spread out before him.



“Huh? Isn’t that Foll over there?”

After arriving in Kianoides and gathering their luggage, Furcas spotted a little girl at the wharf. She noticed the group at the same time and ran over to them.

“Hi! Did you just get back?” Foll asked, greeting them.

“Yeah! Are you out on an errand for Zagan?” Furcas asked.

“Nope. Work. I’m an Archdemon now.”

“Oh yeah! You’re amazing, Foll.”

“Of course.”

She didn’t seem offended at all as she puffed out her chest with pride, a childish smile on her face all the while.

“Milady, don’t run off on your own.”

Dexia ran after her, gasping for air, apparently having been put to work by the young Archdemon.

“Oh, you’re with her too?” Behemoth said in a gentle voice. “How are things on your end going?”

“Um, about that...” Dexia trailed off, hesitating to answer for some reason. She took a sidelong glance at the two girls behind her. One was her little sister, Aristella, while the other...

“You’re...Asmodeus?!” Behemoth yelled, suddenly raising his guard.

“Eek!” the girl called Asmodeus yelped and jolted backward.

“This is Lily,” Foll said, holding out an arm in front of Behemoth to protect her. “She got hurt and doesn’t remember anything about herself.”

“What?!” Behemoth shouted hysterically. Then, he leaned down to Foll’s shoulder and whispered, “Little lady! I don’t know what happened, but she’s bad news. That amnesia is definitely an act. If she’s in the area, she’s probably after Archdemon Palace’s treasury. We should tie her up right away... No, she’d escape, but regardless, we should call her out!”

His tone was unexpectedly strong compared to his usual mannerisms.

“What’s wrong, Behemoth?” Furcas asked, whispering in confusion. “She doesn’t look like a bad girl to me.”

This girl he’d called Asmodeus had apparently startled him, since Behemoth was tense and even had tears in his eyes.

“She’s a sorcerer who’s known as the Collector,” Behemoth answered. “Levia and I have gone through hell because of her. Something’s definitely up if she’s involved.”

Behemoth and Levia were under a curse where one would turn into a monster whenever the other maintained a human form. It was currently being suppressed thanks to Zagan, but they’d yet to be totally freed of it. The pair had spent five hundred years trying to undo it, so they’d likely had plenty of opportunities to happen across this Collector.

“Andre already told me,” Foll whispered with a cock of her head. “Still, I felt like saving her.”

“Don’t be fooled, little lady!” Behemoth lashed back. “This is her usual trick. The moment you start trusting her, she’ll betray you.”

Furcas wondered what exactly he’d experienced in the past. There was no anger or hatred in Behemoth’s voice, just heartfelt concern for Foll. Nevertheless, Foll obstinately shook her head.

“She might turn on us, but I’ll believe in her this one time. If she does betray us, I’ll reconsider my approach then.”

“But...”

Levia walked toward the girl as Behemoth tried to convince Foll. She got close enough that their noses nearly touched.

“.....”

“Um, um, um...?”

Levia stared at her in silence, and the girl started trembling violently with teary eyes. Levia was completely expressionless, making it impossible to see what was going on inside her head, but upon closer inspection, Furcas could see that there was a crease between her brows, making her gaze look somewhat cross. He'd have been terrified if she'd done that to him.



“Eek! What?! What’s going on here?!”

Lilith chose this inopportune time to come down from the boat...at which point she jumped back and began shivering.

In an unexpected turn, Aristella then stepped timidly forward to protect the girl.

“Levia. Lily is scared.”

“.....”

Levia stared at Aristella for a while, but eventually backed off. Aristella sighed in relief.

“I think...we can believe in her too,” Levia said.

“Are you being serious, Levia?” Behemoth said.

“Mhm.”

He couldn’t really keep up a strong front when it came to her.

“Don’t tell me I didn’t warn ya,” Behemoth replied, ruffling his hair.

“It’ll be all right...probably.”

Now that the little spat had settled down, the girl finally spoke up.

“U-Um, do all of you...know me?” she asked. It looked like she was about to cry at any moment. “Wh-What kind of horrible things have I done?”

“.....”

Watching her tremble so pathetically, everyone was left speechless. Behemoth, Levia, and Dexia—the three people who appeared to know her—looked like they were racked with pangs of guilt.

“I-I, um...only caught a glimpse of you before, so I don’t know much...” Dexia replied, averting her eyes as if to insist she knew nothing.

“I feel like I’ve seen you somewhere before,” the girl said, turning to look at Levia. “That man’s voice is somewhat familiar too...”

It turned out she wasn’t missing her memories entirely. Behemoth’s face was hidden, but she’d reacted to his voice.

In a rare show of emotion, Levia's eyes darted around in a panic as she replied, "B-Behemoth knows more than me."

"Levia?!"

He probably never thought he'd have everything thrown onto his lap. Even through the leather straps covering his face, it was easy to see how shocked he felt.

"Uhhh... How do I put it? You were a conniv... I mean, s-single-minded person! Yes, single-minded!"

"B-But didn't I do something bad...?" the girl asked.

"Well...when you're so single-minded, you tend to create grudges without even knowing it. Yup, that's just life."

"Is...that so?"

He hadn't really answered her in the end, so the girl didn't look at all satisfied with his explanation.

"There's no point in worrying about not remembering!" Furcas joined in with a smile. "I don't worry about it either!"

"Eep! U-Um, and you are...?"

"I'm Furcas! Nice to meetcha! Uh, Miss Asmodeus?"

"Oh, um, I'm going by...Lily."

"I see! Nice to meetcha, Lily!"

He held out his hand with a grin, which she timidly took. After that, she smiled, a look of relief on her face.

"Somehow, I feel like this isn't our first meeting either," she said.

"Really? Sorry, I don't remember anything about my past."

"You mean...you also have amnesia?"

"Ha ha, well, I've got my bro and Lilith, so I'm not really bothered by it."

That statement made him come off as overly optimistic, but this was everything to Furcas.

“You’re amazing, Furcas,” the girl said, casting her eyes down and blushing a little. “I wonder if I can become like you.”

“It’ll be all right. I can tell at a glance that you’re a good person.”

“...Thanks.”

She smiled like a blooming flower. If he didn’t have Lilith, Furcas might’ve fallen in love at first sight. And as he got caught up in the moment, Foll raised her voice and said, “Lily, it’s about time to get going. We’ll see the rest of you later.”

“Sure! Hang in there, Foll!” Furcas exclaimed.

Foll took her group and left. Dexia still looked suspicious, but Zagan probably wanted at least one person like that around his daughter.

After seeing them off, Lilith muttered coldly, “Hmm... Well, wasn’t she cute?”

“Yeah... Uh, what? Lilith? Aren’t you standing a little far from me?”

“Is that so? This is the same distance as usual.”

She was standing by his side, yet she was far enough away that she was barely out of reach if he stretched his arm.

“Uhhh...Lilith? Are you mad, maybe?”

“Me? Why?”

“So you *are* mad?”

Lilith’s eyes were so cold that it felt like they could wither a plant with but a single gaze. Furcas had no idea what he’d done to deserve this treatment. Selphy was mad at him all the time, but this was a first from Lilith, so he was in a complete fluster.



“So you’re Asmodeus, eh?”

Sometime later, Zagan faced the girl Foll had brought to Archdemon Palace’s throne room. He’d received a report from Alshiera beforehand, so he had a general idea of the situation. She hadn’t been out in the open, but the vampire had been watching over Foll this entire time.

See, he'd finally gotten to a stage where he could hold a proper conversation with her, but it turned out that when things got complicated, she couldn't manage without having a chessboard between them. It was a pain to bring the thing out each and every time they talked, but it was far better than when she'd simply gone silent, so he put up with it.

The girl in front of him was pale and trembling as if she'd been placed on the gallows.

To think this is the notorious Collector... If not for the Sigil of the Archdemon glowing on her right hand, I wouldn't believe it.

Inside the throne room were Zagan; the girl; Foll and her attendants, Dexia and Aristella; and Nephy, who'd come flying in when she'd heard her daughter had returned. Looking up, there was a single bat up on the ceiling, so it seemed Alshiera was also listening in.

The girl was still trembling violently, so Foll stepped forward in her stead.

"This is Lily. Zagan, I want to help her."

"Hmm..."

This troubled Zagan.

The most important thing right now is getting Nephy's birthday present ready!

The deadline was now less than a month away, yet the end still wasn't in sight. Things would be fine if he just did as Naberius said, but something inside Zagan was warning him not to. As such, there was no time to spare, and it would be better to ruthlessly deal with any seeds of trouble. That was his current state of mind, anyway.

Frankly, the best and most reliable course of action was simply killing her right then and there to grant her Sigil to Barbatos. He'd heard mountains of nasty rumors, and even if he saved her, she wasn't the type to show any gratitude.

Still, Foll was already an Archdemon and Zagan had acknowledged her growth. Thus, he wanted to respect her wishes. What's more, he did feel somewhat reluctant to kill a girl who looked like a newborn fawn.

"Please," Foll said as Zagan grimaced. "I'll take proper care of her."

“Am I some kind of pet?!” the girl yelled in shock.

Looks like the two of them are getting along already.

Zagan was actually touched. Foll’s words had undone all the tension binding this girl. It probably hadn’t been her intention, but there was enough trust between them that this could be accomplished.

In that case, I suppose it’s fine.

If she didn’t have any memories, it was doubtful she would pull anything off. Besides, if she did try anything underhanded, that meant betraying Foll, which was more than enough of a reason for Zagan to kill her.

Zagan finally nodded and said, “Make sure to take her for walks too.”

“Mmm...”

“At least treat me like a person!” the girl protested with teary eyes.

“Master Zagan, don’t tease her,” Nephy interjected, the tips of her ears quivering. “Um, Miss...Lily, right? Master Zagan is saying he’ll take you under his protection.”

“Um, it didn’t sound that way to me, though...” Lily mumbled with a bewildered look in her eyes.

“He’s saying it’s all right for you to stick around. Isn’t that great?” Foll said with a smile.

“Is that something to be happy about...?” the girl replied with a frown, acting like this whole meeting was endlessly humiliating.

“Now that I think about it, I’ve yet to introduce myself,” Nephy said, a gentle smile on her face. “I’m Nephelia, this girl’s mother.”

“Huh?!” the girl gasped in shock. Her eyes turned to saucers, not quite grasping what Nephy meant.

“And this is Master Zagan, her father.”

The girl looked between Foll and Nephy in confusion before mumbling, “B-But your races...?”

She’d already been informed that Zagan was Foll’s father, but apparently, she

hadn't been informed of anything regarding his race. A human father, a high elf mother, and a dragon daughter—it was pretty unreasonable to have someone understand on the spot when the family was introduced like that.

“Is it that strange to have a family made up of random races?” Zagan asked, shrugging.

To take things a little further, Zagan's mother was a succubus vampire. Honestly, there probably weren't many families out there who had so little commonality in race.

Zagan had kept his voice as nonthreatening as possible, so even though the girl started and trembled, she nodded timidly.

“Um...a little,” she answered.

“An honest one, I see. Foll is our adopted daughter. Isn't she a good girl?” Zagan asked, throwing Foll a glance.

The girl nodded quickly and replied, “She's really kind.”

Zagan and Nephy both looked satisfied. Seeing this, the girl finally smiled.

“You two look like quite the happy married couple as well,” she said.

“Gah!”

Zagan and Nephy choked at the same time upon hearing that statement.

“Huh...?”

“They're really bashful. Try not to touch on that subject,” Foll said.

“Is that so?”

The girl blinked and cocked her head in confusion, which made Foll shoot her an amused look. Dexia and Aristella were used to this by now, so they also shook their heads with tired smiles gracing their lips. Zagan was too embarrassed to admit that they weren't even married yet and had only just become lovers.

In any case, there was a need to warn her of something else. Thus, he cleared his throat before addressing the girl again, saying, “Lily, or whatever you go by now, I'll allow you to walk around this castle freely. However, this is an

Archdemon's castle. If you value your life, you'd better not touch anything carelessly."

At most, he was treating this girl—Lily—as a guest. She was on the same level as Barbatos. She wasn't recognized as family, so if she tried to steal any grimoires or treasures, she would trigger the same severe traps Barbatos would.

If her memories do return, Archdemon Palace's treasury will be her first target.

He considered Lily Foll's friend, but he had no intention of being the least bit negligent toward the Archdemon known as the Collector. Lily gasped in fear at his warning, which prompted Foll to take her hand.

"It's only a problem if you steal anything. If you come and go normally, nothing will happen."

"M-Mmm..."

With that, Lily let the strength out of her shoulders, even if she was still a little tense.

Suddenly, a knock came from the throne room's door.

"My liege, it's Raphael. I've returned."

"Hm?"

It appeared that Raphael was back from his hot springs vacation. He was interrupting despite knowing there was a guest here, which meant there was probably some sort of trouble.

Zagan gave Lily a quick glance before answering, "Come in. We're already done here."

"As you wish."

Raphael didn't enter alone. A young Orias accompanied him, which wasn't all that strange, but behind her was a completely unexpected face.

"You!" Zagan yelled on impulse, shooting up to his feet. It was a black-haired boy with silver eyes. The second-generation Silver-Eyed King raised his hand

awkwardly before saying, "Hey, Zagan. Long time no see."

"Don't just 'hey' me. You should've notified me that you were still alive," he replied with an air of criticism in his voice.

"Were you worried about me?" the boy asked in wonder.

"...Did you assume I wouldn't care?"

The boy smiled somewhat apologetically, yet happily, then shrugged and replied, "Sorry about that. I don't have a means of sending a message in this age, and I had no idea where you lived either. Please forgive me, Zagan."

"Now that you mention it, that makes perfect sense..."

It was, in fact, unreasonable to demand a message like that.

Lily looked at the two of them in confusion, then whispered to Foll, "Um, are they brothers or something?"

"Nope. That's probably Zagan's father. I've never seen him before, though."

"What does that mean?" Lily asked, her face frozen in a splendid display of confusion.

Orias was turning to look at her whispering granddaughter when her brow shot up and she mumbled, "Oh...?"

She seemed to realize that Lily was Asmodeus, but had determined that now wasn't the time to bring it up. Orias did nothing but look at her. Raphael was also wary of the unfamiliar guest, but kept his silence nonetheless. Zagan expected nothing less of the butler who had his unconditional trust.

"There's someone I want you to meet," Zagan said as he walked up to the black-haired boy. He felt strangely excited, as much as that displeased him.

It turns out I'm happy to see this guy alive.

He had no choice but to admit that fact.

"...Oh, before that, what should I call you?"

"Uhhh, right... There's a guy who's calling me Silver, but I guess Silver-Eyes will do for now."

“Silver-Eyes? Very well. Nephy, Foll, come here.”

The two complied and walked over to his side. It seemed they had a fair grasp of the situation.

“This is Nephy,” Zagan said. “She’s, um...my lover.”

Nephy curtsied elegantly and added, “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Nephelia. May I...call you father?”

“Um, I wonder... I’m not actually the real person...” Silver-Eyes answered evasively.

“This is Foll,” Zagan continued. “She’s our daughter.”

“Hang on, Zagan,” Silver-Eyes cut in. “How do you have a child already when you’re still only lovers? You need to make these things clear when you’re a family.”

“Ugh, that’s, um...” Zagan hemmed and hawed, averting his eyes.

“The two of them were way more awkward when they took me in,” Foll answered in his stead, shaking her head. “Them becoming proper lovers is a big step forward. I can wait, so it’s fine.”

“Seriously...? What have you been doing, Zagan?”

Zagan wanted to cover his face in shame.

“So then, you’re adopted, right?” Silver-Eyes asked as he squatted down to match Foll’s eyeline. “Have they been kind to you?”

“Mhm. They both show me a ton of love, so there’s no need to worry.”

“I see... Mmm, in that case, I have nothing to say,” he stated calmly. Then, he patted Foll’s head before standing up and saying, “How should I regard myself around you, then...?”

“How about calling yourself a close uncle?”

A voice rang through the halls, making that suggestion. Then, a swarm of bats flapped noisily down and gathered in front of Silver-Eyes, and Alshiera stepped out of it. “How do you do, my dearest?”

“Good day, Alshiera.”

With that, Alshiera squeezed her hands tightly in front of her chest, figuring out what he meant by referring to her like that.

“I see. You’ve chosen to walk a different path...” she mumbled.

“Sorry. I have his memories, but I doubt I can become the man himself.”

The second-generation Silver-Eyed King Lucia—that was the man Silver-Eyes had been resurrected as in the present age. However, precisely because of his wisdom, he knew that he was a fabrication.

So long as he knew this, he couldn’t become the real thing. No matter how much he loved Alshiera, his mind kept insisting that those emotions were a mere construct. That was why he had no other answer to the situation.

“Please don’t apologize,” Alshiera said. “That is proof that you are no mere reflection of the past, that you’ve become your own individual. I shall celebrate that fact.”

Zagan didn’t peel his eyes off the pair.

My mom is a strong woman.

She surely loved her departed husband, who had been a pillar that supported her these thousand years. And yet, even if the man she was finally reunited with was nothing more than an illusion, she accepted him with a smile. Faced with the noble vampire, Silver-Eyes returned her smile, finding himself on the verge of tears.

“I can’t become him, but will you allow me to wish for your happiness?”

“There’s no need for you to worry. I happen to be quite happy right now, you know?” Alshiera answered as she turned to face her family, who were all so disparate in age and race.

“Thank goodness,” Silver-Eyes said, the relief evident in his voice. “I planned to stake my life on stopping *him* if I had to, but it looks like there’s no need for that.”

“Huh...?”

The “him” Silver-Eyes spoke of seemed to be different from whom he’d been referencing thus far. Everyone cocked their head in confusion, but then,

suddenly, a boisterous voice resonated through the room.

“I finally found ya, Ashy! You’re not gettin’ away this time!”

“Eek!”

Alshiera leaped up and screamed in a way that Zagan had never seen before. She timidly turned around to face a spot where a boy with scarlet hair and eyes stood, his arms folded in an imposing stance.

“I came back alive just as I promised!” the boy yelled, thrusting a finger at Alshiera vigorously. “So yeah, now it’s time for our date!”

Why hadn’t anyone taught this boy the concept of reading the room? Zagan felt a newfound hatred for the world from a thousand years ago as he watched him...

Chapter IV: Wanting to Be with a Loved One Must Be a Fundamental Desire

“So she snuck into Kianoides...?”

Three figures were present in a dimly lit room. The one who uttered those words was a young man with round glasses who was seated in the center. He appeared to be injured and had his top draped over him instead of passing his arms through the sleeves. He had his fingers steepled together and rested his chin on his hands. The way he hunched his back showed that his injuries still pained him. On his right hand glowed the fourth Sigil of the Archdemon that Zagan had failed to obtain.

“Do your wounds still hurt, Marchosias?” the man next to him asked. This was another young-looking man, but sometimes he also appeared elderly. His most distinctive feature was his slit-thin eyes, making it unclear whether they were even open at all.

“What the hell are you scheming, Bato?” the man called Marchosias asked, looking up at him.

“You wound me. Aren’t we friends?” the man called Bato replied, shrugging shamelessly before opening his slit-thin eyes ever so slightly and smiling. “I guess I’m not your enemy, at least. I’ve always been more in tune with you than Lady Alshiera, after all. Why don’t we get along as fellow hated men?”

“I’d rather not be lumped in with the likes of you.”

“Ouch, that hurts.”

The young man then turned to the other figure.

“Eligor, you head for Kianoides. Labolas has his uses, but he loses sight of his surroundings when he gets engrossed in something. If he starts going at it with Zagan, bring him back no matter what you have to do. He’ll get killed.”

“You’re better off cutting Glasya-Labolas loose already. He’ll inevitably bring

harm to you one day.”

The remaining figure’s voice was that of a young woman. She looked to be somewhere in her midtwenties. She had a prominent mole beneath her lips, but there was something far more distinctive about her than that. Just visible beneath her hood, a pitch-black charm covered in incantations masked her eyes.

“Is that a fortune?” the young man asked.

“No, call it a woman’s intuition,” she answered with confidence.

The young man shook his head and replied, “He’s necessary right now.”

“...He cut down Asmodeus.”

“What?”

The young man appeared to be unaware of this information, as he raised a brow.

“Oops. Isn’t that pretty bad?” the other man asked. “She was ordered to steal *that*...”

The young man shook his head again and stated, “Asmodeus shall fulfill her contract no matter the cost. She’s the most tenacious of all the Archdemons. In that one aspect, I respect her.”

“What did you offer her that makes you so sure of her loyalty? A contract can only be established between two consenting parties.”

“Nothing major. Not to me, at least. But she will sacrifice anything to acquire it. She won’t ever give up... Even if she’s killed once or twice, she’ll keep at it.”

“.....”

The woman bit her lips in dissatisfaction, but she had no intention of interjecting more than she already had.

“If I could go myself, there’d be no problem...” the young man mumbled, looking down at his hand. “But the Silver Eyes have no idea how to hold back. They truly are goddamned monsters.”

Even if he’d been manipulated, this young man had clashed with those two

head-on, leaving him in this sorry state. He needed more time for his wounds to recover. There was an air of pride in his voice, though.

“You’re more than enough of a monster yourself for taking on two of those Silver-Eyed Kings at once and living to tell the tale,” the other man replied with a laugh.

“Hmph!”

“In any case, it’s true that we need to hurry. There’s no time. Depending on how things go, the fourth-generation eye might awaken.”

“The fourth... You had a go with her, didn’t you? How would you rate her?”

“She’s already at the second’s level. And even if it’s imperfect now, she wields Azazel. If she awakens, she’ll surely surpass the second like you planned.”

That was exactly why she’d be unmanageable if she were an enemy. The young man leaned back into his chair and said, “Either way, nothing will begin until we have the key. We’ll have to wait for those two to send in a report.”

“As you wish.”

The other man bowed, and the woman left without saying another word. The malice from three Archdemons was now closing in on Kianoides.



A painful silence dominated Archdemon Palace’s throne room. This was the first time this family had gathered, and a young red-haired man had intruded, seemingly completely incapable of reading the room. Raphael and Orias appeared to know what was going on. They were both making faces like they figured it’d end up like this. Among everyone present, the first to come to their senses was Foll.

Is this boy also a Nephilim?

Foll hadn’t met the boy before, so she observed him with a cocked head. She didn’t recall seeing him in the capital of the oppressed. He was a stray, so to speak, but all Nephilim were under Foll’s jurisdiction. It looked like he was acquainted with Alshiera, but Foll wasn’t sure how to best handle him.

The most important thing right now is making sure Zagan can celebrate

Nephy's birthday properly.

Foll reaffirmed her objective. If this boy obstructed their plans, she'd have to consider eliminating him. Otherwise, she'd put him to use. As such, she needed to gather information first. Thus, she decided to keep a careful eye on him for now. She'd prepared herself for anything, so she managed to react to what happened the very next instant.

"I-I'll excuse myself here!" Alshiera exclaimed as she split apart into countless bats and tried to fly away.

"Wait, explain things properly first!"

Unfortunately for her, Foll caught her by the arm and stopped her.

"Nice! Good job, little girl!" the boy said, clenching his fist and raising his voice. Everyone else turned cold eyes toward Alshiera, who awkwardly avoided their gazes.

"Alshiera, what's going on?" Foll asked, looking straight at her.

"Um, it's just a little something related to the other day's incident," she began mumbling, trying to make up some kind of excuse, but she failed to really come up with anything.

"You're Sir Asura...yes?" Nephy said with an air of relief. "Thank you very much for your help the other day."

Nephy gave him a quick bow, and the boy—Asura—returned a cheerful smile.

"Yeah! That girl...Nephteros, was it? It's great that you managed to save her! Why, I met her on the way here!"

Nephteros wasn't with Raphael's group right now, so perhaps she'd stayed behind in Raziel.

"Master Zagan, this is the man who lent us his aid when we were trying to save Nephteros. He's not a bad person."

His bride's words finally freed Zagan from his frozen state.

"Hmm... I'm sure you're right, but are you fine with this, Silver-Eyes?"

Silver-Eyes smiled bitterly and nodded in resignation as he replied, "He

cooperated with Alshiera on the condition that she go on a date with him. Besides, I lost in a one-on-one battle against him, So I have no right to interject.”

“You lost?”

Zagan found that answer unexpected, but either way, if they had already settled the matter, he had no obligation to put a stop to things. Thus, he folded his arms, shut his mouth, and decided to quietly watch the situation unfold. All eyes then gathered on Alshiera once more.

“Augh... There’s no need to force me to say it here and now...” Alshiera muttered, not knowing when to give up.

“It’s your fault for not talking things out with Asura properly,” Silver-Eyes replied admonishingly. “Besides, seeing as you didn’t refuse, you’re not opposed to the idea or anything, right?”

“Even you, my dearest...?” she mumbled with a tremendously embarrassed expression on her face.

Silver-Eyes smiled back at her upon hearing that.

I wonder why she’s acting so reluctant, then?

Foll didn’t really get it. If she really hated the idea, Alshiera could’ve just vanished on the spot. She could’ve driven Asura away by force too. And yet, here she was with no clue how to act as if she’d yet to come to a decision. Foll cocked her head curiously, but then Asura raised his voice again impatiently.

“Man, you really haven’t changed when it comes to this stuff. Didn’t you tell me I was your first love?”

That prompted even Orias and Raphael to join in on staring Alshiera down.

“That’s the part about you that I hate!” Alshiera screamed, her voice going shrill.

“Ha ha, that’s the part I love about you, Ashy.”

“Ghhh... Haaah...” Alshiera let out a sigh of resignation, a grimace still plastered on her face. That, Foll understood.

I get it. She's being indecisive because he's her first love.

At the same time, Foll was a little taken aback. No matter how she looked at the two, Zagan and Alshiera were very similar. If Alshiera had spent a thousand years being indecisive about her first love, wouldn't that mean Zagan and Nephy were in for the same fate? Foll had planned to keep quiet and watch them for at least a hundred years, but a thousand really felt like far too long. *Far, far too long.*

I need to do something.

The upcoming birthday had to succeed, at least, or they really would end up like that for millennia. Thus, Foll's sense of purpose grew all the stronger.

It looked like Alshiera had no more intention of running away, so Foll released her arm. Asura then turned to Zagan as Foll kept a watchful eye on him.

"Oh, before that, there's one other guy I've gotta talk things out with here," Asura said. And with that preamble, Asura thrust his finger at Zagan energetically. "I'm here to seduce Ashy. Zagan, or whatever your name is, you gonna allow that?"

"Hmm...?" Zagan mumbled. He probably hadn't expected the boy to be so up-front about it. He smiled in amusement, then folded his arms thoughtfully. "There's no real point in asking me. I only found out she's my mom recently. If she has no problem with it, then I have no intention of butting in no matter who she chooses to see."

"I do have a problem with it, though..."

There was some form of protest going on, but Zagan continued as if he hadn't noticed it.

"She's the single-minded type who'd say, 'I can't answer,' no matter what you ask her, after all... I have mixed feelings about her, to be frank."

It was true that Zagan didn't really have any good memories of Alshiera, so there was an air of annoyance to his expression.

"Judging by the look of things, you knew her before she ended up like this," Zagan said. "I think it's better to have at least one person like that around her..."

However, you're a Nephilim, aren't you? Are you aware of what you truly are?"

Zagan's question was merciless. Nephilim were heroes of the past who'd been resurrected in the present day, but they weren't the actual people from the past. They'd been given the same bodies and memories, but that was ultimately a feat of replication. However, despite that fact, Asura laughed scornfully.

"Like I give a damn. I'm me. Memories, the soul, or whatever the hell else...does any of that got anythin' to do with me being me?"

His answer was firm and unshakeable. For an instant, it seemed like he didn't really understand his situation, but that answer truly did come from a point of understanding. Perhaps it was more instinctual in his case, though.

Zagan laughed at this, then turned to Silver-Eyes and asked, "I see. Is this the reason you lost?"

Silver-Eyes shrugged without answering. He'd realized he wasn't himself. Asura had realized this too but refused to bend. That was what had settled things in their one-on-one fight.

"Then I have a request. She's an endlessly tiresome woman, but...I'll leave my mom in your care."

Asura's eyes shot open, and then he grinned once more and replied, "Right on! You can count on me!"

Alshiera shook her head frantically, having lost every last one of her escape routes.

"Tell me about your first love next time," Foll said to her teasingly.

"You're such a precocious child, Foll," she answered, poking the little dragon's forehead. She then grabbed Asura by the arm and dragged him out of the room.

"Hey, you done talkin' to Silver already?" Asura asked.

"You saying anything unnecessary is the far bigger concern right now."

"I see! There's a ton I wanna talk to you about too, Ashy!"

"Haaah..."

Alshiera's tendency to be made fun of had apparently been a constant factor

over the last thousand years. Watching the two of them leave with a smile, Foll suddenly noticed that Lily had been strangely silent. She looked up at her, then noticed that Lily's eyes weren't focused on anything.

"Lily?"

"...Huh? Oh, yes? What is it?" Lily responded in a fluster, returning to her senses.

"What's wrong?"

"It's... I wonder..." Lily said, then shook her head. "It felt like someone was calling me..."

Foll narrowed her eyes upon hearing that.

Are her memories returning?

But then, why would she have phrased her memories coming back as someone calling her? Foll could tell some sort of change was going on inside Lily, but she wasn't sure what that was.

"....."

Dexia glared at Lily cautiously, but didn't say anything either. As that went on, the group saw Alshiera and Asura off with sympathetic looks, and once the two were completely out of sight, Zagan suddenly raised his voice.

"All right. Let's tail them."

Alshiera's agony was far from over.



"What's going on?! Why is Mister Shax not here?!" Kuroka complained as she puffed out her cheeks and emptied the contents of her glass in a single gulp. She was drinking a local brew from Liucaon called shochu. In a certain tavern, where for some reason Archdemons and Angelic Knights tended to hang out, Kuroka wailed in a strange mix of sorrow and anger.

Nephteros was seated across from her with Richard to her side. The group was on their way back to the church to report to Chastille, but since it was late, they'd decided on having a meal first. Others were to join them, so they'd

arranged for a larger table. Unfortunately, they soon heard that Archdemon Shax wasn't in town at the moment.

I thought I'd get to see him later so I even held back from going straight to Archdemon Palace!

Kuroka had wanted to go to the underground castle with Raphael's group, but she figured she'd put in some effort to finish her work first so that she could relax when she saw him.

"H-Hang on, Kuroka," Nephteros said, clearly flustered. "Isn't that alcohol? Should you be chugging it like that?"

"Lady Nephteros, please consider the situation," Kuroka replied. "It was nice that you had Richard accompany you on this trip, but what if he hadn't? Even if you had your mother with you, would you really have been able to withstand the feeling of wanting to see him?"

"I-I'm...not very confident I could have," Nephteros replied as she timidly glanced at Richard. She was so cute that even Kuroka wanted to give her a comforting pat on the head.

Richard maintained his composed expression, but couldn't keep himself from blushing. Incidentally, Kuroka didn't need to look to know that the two were holding hands beneath the table.

How nice... If I grow out my hair, will I get a kiss on the hair too?

Kuroka had witnessed that scene from afar. Unfortunately, she couldn't even imagine Shax doing the same thing to her. It could only be accomplished by someone like Richard, after all. She couldn't ask for that from such a dense man. Shax's strong point was how much effort he put into accepting Kuroka in spite of how dense he was. If he were as tactful as Richard, he wouldn't have been the Shax she loved anymore.

Well, Kuroka *was* a little curious about how he'd react were she to grow out her hair.

Setting that thought aside, Kuroka brought her newly refilled glass back up to her lips and exclaimed, "It was fun going on a trip with father, but Shax never even contacted me once the entire time! He can use telepathy! Isn't that

horrible?!”

It was apparently fairly difficult to use telepathy over long distances, but Kuroka knew that Shax was capable of it after their mission to gather information on Shere Khan. Plus, even discounting telepathy, he could’ve sent a normal letter. In fact, Kuroka had even sent him postcards from Raziel.

Not that he ever sent a response, obviously!

They’d finally reached a point where they could claim to be a couple with pride, so the lack of contact was far too much for Kuroka. Nevertheless, she’d tried to tell herself that Shax was doing his best too, but now she had no idea when he would ever return. It was inevitable for Kuroka’s discontent to burst at the seams.

Lilith nervously entered the tavern as she heard that wailing and asked, “J-Jeez, Kuroka, what’s wrong? We could hear you from outside, you know?”

“Waaah, Lilith!” Kuroka bawled as she dove into Lilith’s meager chest on impulse. The succubus gently stroked her head.

“You’ve become quite the pampered child in the short time we’ve been apart,” Lilith said.

“I have times like this every now and then, okay...”

“Well, it’s a bit of a relief, honestly. You should act like this more often.”

“...Okay,” Kuroka replied before cocking her head in confusion. “Oh? Selphy isn’t with you?”

Lilith’s group had also just returned to Kianoides. Kuroka wanted to ask them how things were in Liucaon and share a meal with them, but she couldn’t spot her other childhood friend.

“About that, she apparently has urgent business...” Lilith replied, her expression darkening. “That girl’s the type to never remember any urgent business once she’s forgotten it, though...”

“That does seem odd.”

“What does that even mean...?” Nephteros muttered in astonishment.

Richard then turned to look at the entrance. Furcas was peeking through the door fearfully. He looked like a dog who'd broken something precious to his owner.

"Miss Lilith, is he not joining us?" Richard asked.

"...Does it matter?"

"Lilith?" Kuroka asked, her brows knitting at the odd reaction. "Did something happen with Furcas?"

"Not really."

Her voice was so cold that all the surrounding tables fell silent.

This is the first time I've seen Lilith so mad...

Lilith got angry all the time, but in most cases, she was more like a boiling kettle, so taking off the lid or the like would get her to calm down immediately. Kuroka had never seen such cold anger from her. She was so surprised that her discontent toward Shax had taken a sudden back seat.



“That boy, Furcas, was it?” Nephteros asked, nodding in understanding. “Did he get close to some other girl or something?”

“H-H-H-How do you—?! I-I mean, that’s not the point!” Lilith yelled, bright red to the face.

Nephteros cocked her head like it was perfectly obvious and replied, “I mean, you’re making the same face Nephelia does when Alshiera or Chastille clings to Zagan, you know?”

Kuroka knew exactly what that implied.

“Huh? So Lilith is jealous?”

Having gulped down so much shochu on an empty stomach, Kuroka was more intoxicated than she believed.

“Hwah?! Th-Th-Th-That’s...not...true...I think...”

Perhaps somewhat aware of it herself, Lilith covered her face and fell silent. Seeing that, Nephteros pulled out a chair for her.

“Um, why don’t you sit down first?”

“Uhhh... Thank you.”

“It’s fine. Waitress, can we get some warm milk? Come on, some milk will calm you down.”

For some reason, Nephteros acted like she was perfectly accustomed to handling crybabies. Richard also stood up and guided Furcas over to a seat.

“It’s all right,” Richard said. “She just needs time to get her feelings in order. It’s not like she hates you or anything.”

“R-Really? But how can you tell?”

“I just figure that’s the case...”

“You’re amazing! There’s an awesomeness to you that’s different from Zagan’s!”

“Ha ha ha...” Richard chuckled, straining a smile at Furcas’s innocent display of admiration.

“Sorry, Lilith,” Furcas said, timidly taking a seat next to her. “Did I do something you didn’t like? I’m stupid, so I can’t really tell...”

“...Whatever, it’s fine already. Come on, why don’t you order something?”

“Then I’ll have some warm milk too!”

Luckily, things seemed to have settled down between them rather quickly. After exchanging details of their respective trips, Kuroka managed to feel a little more at ease.

“I see. So they’ve made proper graves for everyone, huh?”

“Mhm. They’re kept them all clean and pretty too,” Lilith replied with a considerate look on her face. “If you’d like to go back for a visit, then Selphy and I will go with you. I’m sure His Highness will give you a break to do so.”

“Thank you, Lilith.”

“We’re childhood friends, aren’t we? Besides, I’m sure everyone will be happy to hear about you and that old guy.”

“Ah...”

Both Nephteros and Richard unintentionally reacted to that change in topic.

Shax, you big dummy!

Anger reared its ugly head once more in Kuroka’s mind, and she puffed out her cheeks.

“Even if I want to introduce him to people, I have no idea where Mister Shax went, so I can’t. He won’t return any of my letters, and he won’t contact me even though he can use telepathy!”

“Aaah...”

Lilith figured out what had gone on in the tavern prior to her appearance. She was at a complete loss.

“I bet Mister Shax isn’t even bothered by the fact that he can’t see me! Waaaaaah!”

“Huh? H-Hang on, c-calm down, Kuroka!”

“Lilith, you should calm down too. You nearly knocked over your milk.”

Lilith had bumped her cup in a panic, but Furcas had kept it from spilling. He’d probably used sorcery to do that. It looked like he didn’t even need a magic circle to do something so simple at this point.

Kuroka sprawled out over the table and wailed, but then a head suddenly plopped on top of her head.

“Like hell that’s true. Trust me a li’l more.”

“Hwuh...?”

Kuroka raised her eyes and found Shax’s face before her, even stubblier than usual.

“Mister Shax...! Uh, what?”

She shot to her feet on reflex, so her sight swayed slightly. She was about to fall flat on her face when Shax gently caught her.

“Whoa there... Looks like you’ve had quite a lot to drink, Kurosuke.”

“Hwah... My head feels all floaty...”

It felt extremely pleasant, and in a different way from when she’d had that plum wine. She couldn’t even stay on her feet properly.

“Hey missy, could you bring some water for her?”

Shax made a brief order with the waitress, then straightened Kuroka up by the shoulders. His clothes looked worn out, as his robe had tears all over and was covered in clumps of mud. He’d apparently been injured too, since Kuroka could smell blood on him. Frankly, he didn’t look anything like a new Archdemon.

“Sorry ’bout that. I wanted to settle things before you got back, but I was a bit late.”

“Were you on some kind of mission...?” Kuroka asked in a slurred voice.

“Nothing that grandiose. I just had some minor business to take care of. It’s done and dusted now, though.”

This man tended to underplay everything he did. He couldn’t possibly have

ended up in such a state from “minor business,” after all. Something serious had clearly happened, but he was keeping it from Kuroka so that she wouldn’t worry.

I’m the one who deserves a little more trust...

Still, she was happy to be thought of that way, so she kept quiet and nuzzled her face into his chest. Her two tails even rubbed against him, but Shax was used to that, so he simply patted her head in response. After confirming that she’d calmed down, Shax sat her down in a chair, then took a seat next to her as if to watch over her.

“Hey, mister, at least reply to Kuroka’s letters. This girl was raising quite the fuss over it,” Lilith said.

“Letters?” Shax asked, wide-eyed. “Seriously? My bad. I haven’t checked for any yet. It’s been just a bit busy around here...”

The fact that he hadn’t even picked them up meant the situation had been that tough on him. Kuroka had heard that Shax was also given a break, so she hadn’t expected it to be like this. And yet, here she was getting angry all on her own. She felt ashamed of herself.

“That’sh, um, shawwy...”

“Gah, you can’t even articulate things properly anymore... C’mon, have some water. You’ll feel better.”

Kuroka had gotten remarkably drunk. Even after sitting back down, she felt dizzy and swayed about unsteadily.

“By the way, Kurosuke,” Shax asked, supporting her back all the while. “Have there been any abnormalities with your eyes since then?”

“Myaa...? My eyesh? I can shee purrfectly fine...?”

“Hmm...”

It looked like it was useless to ask her now, so he turned to Nephteros and Richard next.

“How’s she look to you two? Anything wrong with her?”

Richard and Nephteros exchanged looks, then shook their heads.

“I don’t know what you’re worried about,” Nephteros answered. “As far as we know, there’s nothing wrong with her. If there is, I’m sure Lord Raphael would’ve noticed, so I doubt anything has gone wrong.”

“I see... That’s good, then.”

Nephy had been the one to heal Kuroka’s eyes. They’d been very careful during the postoperative period too, so it was unlikely for there to be any aftereffects now... Shax appeared to be worried about something, though, as he was making a very grave face.

Mister Shax looks so cool like that...

Kuroka found herself grinning like an idiot and staring at his face, prompting Shax to simply ruffle his hair in resignation.

“Sorry, looks like Kurosuke’s beyond hope. I’ll take her back, so can I leave the report to the church to you guys?”

“Yes, that’s fine,” Nephteros answered.

Kuroka couldn’t even stand up on her own anymore, so Shax hunched over with his back toward her. Kuroka wrapped her arms around him and leaned against him, and he hefted her up. She enjoyed the sight of his ears turning red from the feeling of her breasts squishing against him.

Lilith stared in wonder at how the two of them did all that without exchanging a single word.

“Y-You seem strangely accustomed to that...” she said.

“Hm? Well, it happened a few times while we were out working,” Shax replied with a bitter smile on his face, leaving Lilith speechless. “I mean, I haven’t laid a finger on her, okay?”

“And why haffn’t you, huh?!” Kuroka complained, still utterly drunk.

Shax grimaced as if to tell her, “You really wanna make me say it here?” He then turned to the ear she had over his shoulder and whispered to her.

“You’d rather be sober for your first time, right?”

Kuroka maintained her sullen expression and turned bright red.

“...Yes.”

In other words, he had such desires too. Kuroka squeezed herself against his back tightly, suddenly in a terrific mood.

“Mya ha ha... I’m looking forward to it...”

“Then at least learn your alcohol limit...”

Kuroka purred and rubbed her cheek against him as Shax left the tavern.

“Lilith’s friend has made so much progress...” Furcas said in admiration.

“I’m not exactly sure you can call that progress...” Lilith mumbled.

In the end, Kuroka had no idea she had left the room in such an awkward state behind her.



A song resonated over Kainoides’s port, though it wasn’t clear where it originated from. There were no words to it, so it was more solemn than a church hymn, yet melancholic like a requiem. It was a sweet yet heartrending tune that seemed to exert physical pressure on one’s chest.

The sailors unloading the ships, the merchants checking their cargo, and the sightseers passing by all came to a halt and lent an ear on reflex. The song was coming from the end of the wharf, on one of the less used piers that had deteriorated over time. The singer’s leg, which flapped in the water, wasn’t that of a human, but was a scaly fish’s fin.

Seriously, what the heck am I doing...?

Lilith had gotten jealous upon seeing Furcas acting kind to that girl called Lily, which meant she at least had that much affection for him. Despite hyping herself up to get Lilith to look her way, Selphy felt emotionally overwhelmed by that fact.

She didn’t feel like she could maintain a typical conversation with Lilith and Kuroka in her state, so she’d turned down their invitation for dinner. This was a rare opportunity for the three childhood friends to gather, yet here she was.

Suddenly, the pier behind her creaked as someone approached her.

“Oh? Mister Zagan...? Or not...”

She turned around and found a boy with black hair and silver eyes standing there. He had similar features to Zagan but was someone else, and he looked a little younger than Selphy.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt you,” he said, scratching his cheek awkwardly. “It just felt like you’d jump in if left alone like that.”

“Oh, I’m a siren, so I’d be, like, totally fine if I did.”

Alas, Selphy was born without the ability to read the mood. She flapped her fin around for show, making the boy shake his head.

“That’s not what I mean. How do I put it...? You look sad.”

“...Do I really?”

“In my eyes, at least... May I sit next to you?”

He was acting like he’d come here to stop a suicide.



Am I making such a sour face that someone I've never met would think that...?

It really had been best to keep away from Lilith at this time, then. Having said that, the boy looked to be the one in sorrow. Selphy took a closer look at his face and cocked her head.

"You look kinda down," she said. "If you don't mind, I can, like, totally hear you out."

"How strange. That's what I wanted to say..." the boy replied, covering his face with a hand, perhaps aware of his own expression. "Hmmm. It seems I've been put under the spell of your 'song.'"

"Huh? Did I do something?"

"You haven't noticed...?" he asked, wide-eyed in wonder. "You were singing a Hex Song. If you're not aware, I guess that means you have an innate disposition for it. In my age, there were no singers at your level."

Selphy was left speechless upon hearing the unexpected information.

Hex Song... Is that what Levia talked about...?

By charging mana into a song, it was possible to manipulate those who listened. Had Selphy been doing that unconsciously?

"Only the chosen may listen to the royal family's song."

That was House Neptunia's law. Selphy had found it ridiculous, but perhaps there was actually a reason behind it.

"Do you sing often?"

"Um, every now and then..." Selphy replied, turning pale at the thought.

"Looks like there haven't been any negative effects thus far," the boy said with an unexpected sense of admiration in his voice. "That's probably no miracle. Why, I'd chalk it up to your good nature. What a marvelous thing."

"Huh...? Whatcha mean?"

"Hex Songs affect a person's heart, but if you haven't noticed, that means everyone has cheered up by listening to your song, right?"

Selphy cocked her head again, questioning whether he was right.

“I don’t think so. I mean, sure, I think everyone enjoys it, but I just thought, like, it’d be nice if everyone could feel just a little happier by listening to me.”

“Mmm...” the boy mumbled, nodding in understanding. “I’m sure that’s your answer. I like your song. I’d like you to continue singing without any fear.”

“But didn’t you say you were, like, under its spell?”

Having that pointed out to him, the boy frowned, a troubled look on his face.

“Um... I just experienced something akin to a broken heart, so I kind of sympathized on the spot...”

Selphy understood.

Did my feelings flow through my song?

She hadn’t intended to feel brokenhearted, but she’d been shaken by Lilith’s jealous reaction. Perhaps that was why she’d attracted this boy who’d gone through something similar.

It kinda reminds me of Miss Nephteros’s song.

It felt like so long ago. Back on Lake Suflaghida, when the Sludge Demon Lord had appeared, Nephteros’s song of celestial mysticism had conveyed her emotions and memories to everyone present.

Selphy found herself at a loss, and perhaps under the impression that she was urging him to continue, the boy spoke up.

“I don’t have any confidence in my own memories and emotions, but seeing the girl I loved moving on with someone else was an unexpected shock to my system. That was when I finally noticed that this ‘love’ inside me was also my own.”

The boy’s words were abstract, so Selphy didn’t really understand.

But I kinda get it.

As such, Selphy smiled in her usual carefree manner.

“In that case, you just gotta go after her now and get her back! That’s what I would do.”

How could she have possibly forgotten such a simple fact? What need was there for her to feel down? Hadn't she already decided to take on this fight and get Lilith to turn her way? The boy looked at her in wonder as she reaffirmed her resolve.

"You're awfully strong," he said.

"Heh heh heh, you think? You're, like, making me blush."

Selphy had cheered back up before she even knew it. Seeing that, the boy rose to his feet. In that instant, a nasty creak resounded through the air. People were prohibited from coming to this pier because of how deteriorated it was, so this was the natural result of having two people on it.

"Huh?"

"Whoa!"

The rotten brace snapped with ease, and the pier flipped over splendidly, sending the two tumbling into the canal. Fortunately, it was shallow enough here for their legs to reach the ground, so Selphy and the boy simply exchanged flabbergasted looks.

"Ha ha ha..."

The two of them laughed at each other. That was when Selphy realized that she didn't know his name.

"My name's Selphy. What's yours?"

"My name... I don't actually have one. For now, I'm having people call me Silver-Eyes."

"Pretty sure that's not a name," Selphy replied, bending back in confusion. She then folded her arms and sank into thought. Two water droplets ran down her bangs and dripped into the water. She was putting very serious effort into this, for her.

Before long, she raised her voice as if she'd had a revelation and said, "Right! Whatcha think about the name Ain?"

"Ain? That's a splendid name," the boy replied, a little confused.

Selphy smiled as she always did, then acted like there was nothing out of the ordinary.

“My full name’s Ainselph. It’s super long, so I’ll, like, give ya half of it.”

The boy’s eyes turned to saucers and he brushed back the hair that was sticking to his face.

“You got me there...” he said, then smiled. “Thanks. I’ll gladly accept it. From now on, my name is Ain.”

“Glad ya like it.”

Selphy peered at the boy’s face, then nodded in satisfaction.

“Oh, you finally smiled.”

“Huh...? I thought I’d been smiling this whole time.”

“Hmm, it was, like, kinda fake? But now it’s super natural.”

The boy—Ain—touched his face in shock.

“Is that so...? I didn’t notice.”

Ain then returned a carefree smile of his own, climbed back onto what was left of the pier, and reached out to pull Selphy up.

“Thanks, Selphy. I hope we meet again.”

“I’m, like, always in this town, so you can see me anytime you want, Ain.”

And as Ain left, Selphy energetically waved her hand and saw him off.



“Foll, is that Alshiera girl your friend?”

In the end, the majority of those who’d been in the throne room had gone to spy on Alshiera. The only ones who hadn’t were Raphael and the silver-eyed boy. Raphael had his duties as a butler to attend to, while Silver-Eyes had said that he had no interest in tailing people from the shadows.

For whatever reason, it looked like Raphael had had his attention on Lily. Perhaps he’d seen her before during her time as an Archdemon?

In any case, that left seven people tailing Alshiera. They would have stood out

far too much if lumped together, so they'd split up into several groups. Although, everyone tailing her was likely to be noticed by Alshiera regardless. Among those groups, Foll was accompanied by Lily.

"She is...I think," Foll answered vaguely, cocking her head.

"Um, did you have a fight or something?" Lily asked fretfully.

"Nope. Alshiera's a friend, but she's also my granny. It makes it hard to explain."

Once in a while, there were times Foll found it difficult to call Alshiera her friend. Now was one such example, seeing they'd just been talking about Alshiera as family.

"Oh, is...that so?"

Lily smiled awkwardly, not quite sure how to react.

Looks like Alshiera is just fine.

There was a part of Foll that wanted to keep watching, but she felt sorry for getting in Alshiera's way any more than she already had, so she spun on her heels.

"Lily, come with me."

"Huh...? Where are we going?"

"You need some proper clothes."

Lily was wearing a simple dress as a substitute for a patient's gown. Thus, it was better to get something proper to walk around town in...or at least to get her some underwear.

"Um, thank you. That'd be great," Lily replied with a look of relief on her face.

"Mmm... But you should prepare yourself."

"What?"

Foll guided Lily to a clothing store that seemed to tower over them, one that even Archdemons feared, in a sense.

"Welcome!"

“Run away, Foll! You can’t bring cute girls here!”

“Huh...? Huh?”

Lily was dragged into the store as a vulpin girl screamed.

Half an hour later...

“Nooo! These aren’t clothes! They’re just strings!”

“Nice! You’re perfect, Lily! Shyness brings out a girl’s true abilities! Show me more of that face! Oh, this one’s next.”

Foll watched the two of them while sipping juice through a straw. After she’d informed them that Lily was today’s customer, Kuu had brought her a drink.

“We have candy and the like too, Foll. It’s about time for the chief to calm down, so just wait a sec.”

“It’s fine. If I have any now, I won’t have room for dinner.”

“Hnnngh, you’re such a good girl, Foll. Come play anytime you want!”

Kuu beamed as she rubbed her cheek against Foll’s. Lately, it felt like her reactions were trending more and more toward Manuela’s.

Lily’s body was covered in scars. However, even after seeing that, Manuela was merciless. She went from making Lily wear clothes with as much exposure as underwear to things one could barely call clothing that only covered her scars. And yet, all of it suited Lily properly. That was the truly terrifying part.

Lily’s eyes spun in a daze. She no longer had any idea what she was being made to wear when Manuela gently embraced her.

“They say scars are like a man’s war medals, but that’s nonsense. Scars can be beautiful on a woman’s body too, you know? Your scars are very pretty, Lily.”

“What does that have to do with these tiny straps you call clothing?”

“That’s just how I like my girls!” Manuela answered without a moment’s hesitation.

“Eek!”

Lily was shocked. This was something like a rite of passage in this town, but

maybe it was just a little too stimulating for her. Foll set aside her juice and stood up, then tugged on Manuela's sleeve.

"Manuela, it's about time for you to get her proper clothes. Lily's troubled."

"Mrgh. If you say so, Foll. Guess I have to."

Manuela made a sour look as she brought out a frilly lace shirt and a long, voluminous skirt. There was a red ribbon tied at the chest, making it look like something for a young noble girl. There were even white gloves for her hands, making this the complete opposite in exposure from what she'd been forced to wear so far.

"How about this? It's a little dark, but I tried matching your violet eyes. The fabric is thin, so it should be perfect for the upcoming season."

"Oh, yes... Um, I think it looks wonderful."

Lily probably hadn't expected to be given proper clothes, so she had a bewildered look about her.

Manuela then grabbed both of her hands and added, "But what I said earlier is true, okay? Please remember that you have the choice to show off your scars."

"I-I will."

"If you come again, I'll let you wear the clothes I like all you want!"

"I'll...have to think about that..." Lily managed to say with a haggard expression, somehow surviving her severe baptism.



"Good grief, what are those silly children up to?"

Naturally, Alshiera and Asura had noticed they'd been followed.

"Ha ha, ain't that fine? Don't it mean you're loved?"

"This is only happening because you asked me out in such a public fashion. I'd rather you feel some regret over this turn of events."

"But Ashy, if I didn't go that far, you would've run away for days, yeah?"

“.....”

He was right on the money, so Alshiera remained silent. She'd already spent over two weeks running away from him, so she couldn't exactly make any excuses.

Asura held Alshiera's hand and tugged her along. Unlike hers, his hand was warm. Judging by their appearances, the two looked like a thirteen-year-old girl and a fifteen-year-old boy at most. As such, perhaps it looked less like a date and more like siblings on an outing. But having spent nearly a year watching over Archdemon Zagan and Nephy, the locals quickly presumed what was going on and watched the two with smiles on their faces.

“So? Whatcha wanna do?” Asura asked, ignorant of the surrounding gazes. “This is actually my first date.”

“I'd rather you not ask me that. I'm in a fairly similar position.”

“You mean you never went on a date with Silver?”

“Well, the world was in far more of a mess than during your era at the time, so when the fighting finally ended, his body was no longer in a state to even walk.”

The second-generation Silver-Eyed King, Lucia, had died at the age of fifteen. The entirety of his short life had been spent on the battlefield.

“Ashy...”

“Please don't make that face. I was happy.”

Lucia had used every last minute of the time he had left for Alshiera's sake and had even left her with children—Zagan and Lilithiera. She just hadn't been able to protect them due to her own weakness.

“Wah!” she exclaimed. As she reminisced over old memories, Asura had suddenly started rubbing her head roughly. “What are you doing?”

“You seriously haven't changed. The moment I vanish, you start bottlin' up all sorts of stuff.”

“...I do believe you should put in some more effort not to anger me,” Alshiera said as she glared at him reproachfully. However, Asura simply laughed as if

he'd been waiting for that reaction.

"Ain't it fine? It's bad for your health if you don't let out some steam every now and then, ya know?"

"I'm undead, though."

Alshiera didn't like the idea of a health-conscious vampire. Asura didn't really seem to be listening to her, though, as he looked around the area.

"Let's see... Where's the nicest view here?"

"Who knows? I'm not particularly well-informed..."

Their eyes ended up stopping on the church's steeple. With that, it was guaranteed that one more person would get dragged into the depths of misfortune.



"Please excuse us."

"Sorry 'bout this! Just let us through!"

Alshiera and Asura forced their way into Chastille's office through the window.

"Huh? Wh-Wh-What?! What are you...? Oh, the paper!"

After being so pitifully dragged into things, Chastille panicked and dropped her quill pen. A blotch of ink ruined the document she'd been working on, so she broke into tears without hesitation.

"Yo, if it ain't the woman from the other day!" Asura said, raising a hand without showing the slightest hint of remorse. "Looks like you're okay too. Guess I've met pretty much everyone who fought back there now. Good thing that Nephteros girl got saved, huh?!"

"Oh, yes. Thank you for your assistance at the... No, that's what's important right now! Why are you coming in through there? Is something wrong?"

Both Alshiera and Asura cocked their heads.

"Oh, we wanted to climb up top here, then Ashy just started walkin' right up the wall..."

“Huh? The steeple? That’s off-limits to the general public.”

Having thought of the steeple as a spot with a nice view, Alshiera had ignored gravity to walk up the church’s wall. Asura had followed her by running up the vertical surface through sheer willpower alone, but he had complained that there was no way he could keep it up all the way to the top. That was when they had come across a convenient window.

“I’ve had quite the day because of you,” Alshiera replied, practically ignoring Chastille’s protests. “I should be allowed at least that much revenge.”

“You’re such a dummy, Ashy. Don’t ya know buildings have stairs in ‘em?”

“How could I not?”

“...I don’t really get it, but could you stop getting others involved in your petty revenge?” Chastille grumbled.

Alshiera criticized Asura for being incapable of reading the mood all the time, but she was basically on the same level as him. With the two of them together, it was practically a calamity. This far surpassed the limits of Chastille’s spirit, so her crybaby self was on full display.

“Look what you did,” Alshiera said, glaring at Asura as if Chastille’s response had nothing to do with her. “How about apologizing? You shouldn’t go around bothering others.”

“Sorry, she’s not the type to listen to others, ya know?” Asura said to Chastille.

“I’m pretty sure you’re both equally bad...” Chastille replied, trembling with tears in her eyes, either from humiliation or bewilderment.

“By the way, you’ve got something at your feet. You okay?” he asked.

“Hwah? He’s, um...”

“It’s just a slightly peculiar fetish,” Alshiera said, cutting her off. “It’s better for an outsider to refrain from talking about their relationship.”

“Oh! Is that what’s goin’ on? My bad...” Asura said, coming to some sort of understanding, and in an unusual turn, he wisely held his tongue.

“I-I don’t have any weird fetish!” Chastille yelled.

“D-D-D-D-Don’t act all weirdly understanding, dammit!”

A gloomy face jumped out from the shadow without hesitation, but Alshiera simply shot him a knowing glance.

“It’s just as you see,” she said.

“...Sure looks like it. Sorry for gettin’ in your way,” Asura said.

“I’m telling you that you’re wrong!” the two victims yelled in unison.

Just then, the sound of something dripping to the floor could be heard along with hushed yet excited whispers.

“Hnnngh! Nice love power! I’m so glad I took this job. Oh, Lady Rachel, your nose is bleeding.”

“Heh heh heh. Heavenly Father, my faith’s outlook has just widened explosively. Miss Sorcerer, your nose is also bleeding.”

A weird granny and nun were peeking through a crack in the door, their eyes sending a shudder down Alshiera’s spine.

Huh? What’s with those two? I didn’t sense their presence at all.

Alshiera boasted significant power that matched her thousand years in this world, but she still hadn’t perceived them whatsoever. Next to the speechless vampire, Asura also felt a cold bead of sweat run down his cheek.

“The modern world is full of scary guys.”

“...No, I believe that’s an extreme exception.”

Either way, those “scary guys” were focused on Chastille and Barbatos, so Alshiera tried to sneak out of the office.

“Hey, stop right there, Lady Alshiera!” the granny yelled.

“Eep!” Alshiera unintentionally yelped, and the granny wiped the blood from her nose and threw the vampire a thumbs-up.

“This is the first time I’ve seen you have so much fun,” she said. “Lady Alshiera, may you experience wonderful love power!”

Alshiera couldn't come up with a response on the spot. She wasn't even aware that she'd been having fun, but maybe the granny was right. She touched her own face to check, then let out a small sigh.

"...Try to keep things in moderation," Alshiera told her.

"Kee hee hee, this is my job, so all is allowed."

It was more her hobby than her job. Regardless, Alshiera decided not to get involved and quickly left the office behind.

"Miss Sorcerer, do you know those two?" the nun whispered. "Tell me more! I'm super interested in that person who kind of looks like Chastille's relative and that vampire!"

"I'd expect nothing less of you, Lady Rachel. I see why Comrade Kuu is so charmed by your talent. But don't be too hasty. This town still has far more love —"

"Let's get out of here quickly," Alshiera said, fear urging her feet onward.



"Hmm, this is a pretty nice view," Asura said.

With the tempestuous day coming to an end, a red hue dyed the sky. A large bell hung from the top of the steeple, so the space up there somewhat resembled a terrace that was used for maintenance. As such, when paired with the luxurious handrails, this could be said to be the best view in town. It was apparently restricted from the general public because of how high it was, but it looked like this was someone's secret spot for enjoying the scenery. A bench for two had been sneakily placed up there, after all.

Asura bent forward over the handrail with joy in his heart as Alshiera started questioning him coldly.

"So? Why did you want to come to a place like this?"

"Well, ya know, it's obviously 'cause I wanted to get a good look at the world you protected."

"...Good grief."

Vampires had no blood flow. Their hearts didn't beat. Regardless, Alshiera felt her cheeks heating up, so she abruptly averted her eyes.

Asura brushed her head comfortingly as if accustomed to that reaction and asked, "Whatcha think, Ashy? How's the view of what you protected?"

"...It's nothing special. It's the same sight as always."

Still, those children were tailing her after hearing this was a date, that crybaby who showed the most amusing reactions after the tiniest prodding and her friend who did her best to live here. It wasn't a bad town.

It wasn't clear how Asura interpreted her indifferent response, as he simply continued ruffling her hair without reservation.

"Ha ha, looks like you really like it here."

"This world is already akin to a child of mine, after all."

She'd been watching over it all this time. There'd been plenty of tragedies. Shere Khan hadn't been the first to attack rare species or the weak, for example. Alshiera had witnessed nauseating events many times over. Nevertheless, humanity persisted. Even in helpless darkness, they fell in love, spread affection, and sometimes even overturned fate. How could she not love the world?

Asura nodded in satisfaction, then plopped onto the bench and said, "Ashy, you take a seat too."

"Yes, yes."

Alshiera did as she was told, which Asura actually found rather unexpected.

"Oh? What's this? Aren't you awfully cooperative today?"

"We're on a date, aren't we? I'll at least listen to some of your selfish requests."

"Heh heh, then I've got one more for ya."

"Hmm...?"

Without even waiting for an answer, Asura tugged on Alshiera's hand. She tumbled over onto him, now sideways and using his lap as a pillow.

“What’s the meaning of this?” she asked.

Nephy or Chastille would have faltered adorably at this point, but at a thousand years old, Alshiera’s expression didn’t change... Or, well, she didn’t intend it to, but she was too scared to check what kind of face she was actually making. In a complete change from before, Asura gently brushed her golden hair.

“You’ve really hung in there these last thousand years, Ashy.”

“.....”

Alshiera’s eyes shot open as Asura continued talking.

“Sorry for leaving you all alone for so long.”

“...I wasn’t really on my own this whole time or anything. There were times I had people by my side as well.”

“That’s a relief,” he replied. And even as he spoke, he continued brushing her head. “This time, I’ll stay with you ’til the very end.”

“...I’m a vampire. I don’t actually have a life span, you know?”

“Then I’ll become a vampire too. Teach me how next time. I’m totally fine with you sucking my blood.”

“...You really are a fool.”

Alshiera’s voice trembled. Before she knew it, tears were running down her cheeks. Despite usually being so talkative, Asura remained silent and continued stroking her head.





Lily moved through the hustle and bustle of town, Foll leading her by the hand.

“Lily, I wanna visit that shop.”

“Isn’t that a restaurant? If we go there, won’t you lose your appetite before dinner?”

“But it looks tasty. Let’s go eat.”

“Fine, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Foll had pointed at a shop that specialized in light meals. Their menu appeared to consist mostly of drinks, but they also sold some sweets that used fresh cream. Many of the customers appeared to be couples. Lily had no way of knowing that this was the rumored shop where “lovers would be blessed to be together forever” because of a visit by Archdemon Zagan.

Foll clambered up onto a chair, then ordered the biggest parfait available without hesitation, whatever a parfait was.

“Isn’t this kinda thing expensive?” Lily asked. “I’m penniless, you know?”

Foll had even bought the clothes Lily was wearing now, so having a girl who looked younger than her pay made Lily feel extremely guilty.

“Mmm... It’s fine. I’m protecting you, so it’s my treat,” Foll said.

“Waaah...?”

They waited in suspense as the waitress brought over a cup with a heart-shaped straw in it. It didn’t look possible for one person to finish it. Foll looked up at the cream-packed cup with gleaming eyes.

“Oooh, so this is... Zagan and Nephy mentioned having it before, so I’ve always wanted to try one.”

“Isn’t this meant for couples?”

“Dexia and Aristella are sisters, but they still ordered it, so it’s okay.”

Foll picked up the long spoon and immediately scooped some cream to get a

taste.

“So sweet.”

The sight of the little girl narrowing her eyes in joy spurred Lily’s desire to protect her. Foll then scooped up some more cream and held out the spoon in front of her.

“Lily, you have some too.”

“Huh? Me too?”

“It’s too much for me.”

Lily swallowed the urge to say that was obvious and closed her mouth over the spoon.

“...Oh, it really is sweet.”

“Right?”

Foll smiled in satisfaction.

She’s so cute...and so kind.

Why was this girl being so kind to her? If Lily had a little sister, she imagined it might feel like this. She clutched the locket hanging over her chest. Inside was a portrait of herself and one other girl. Considering her age, she was probably the older sister, meaning she’d had a little sister, but in all likelihood, that girl was no longer around. Shura had told her that the carbuncles were already extinct, after all.

I probably did bad things in the past.

Even if she didn’t remember, she knew that much judging by the reactions of those she’d met. And yet, Foll had paid no attention to that stuff and treated her kindly.

I want to become someone who can return this girl’s kindness.

At the moment, she didn’t know left from right, but she wanted to search for something she could do to stay by her side.

And as Lily thought of such things, Foll took another scoop of cream and suddenly asked, “Lily, do you like Shura?”

“Hwuh?! Huh? Uh, Shura?” she asked. The question had been so unexpected that Lily nearly fell out of her chair. “Um, do you mean as a friend? Or, um, as a...man?”

“Hmm, let’s go with as a man.”

“What do you mean, ‘let’s go with’?”

Asking a person with amnesia about her love life was a bit of a problem to begin with. Lily raised her voice because of that, and Foll continued with great interest.

“Zagan and Alshiera both have people they love, but for some reason, they dawdle forever. I want to know what love is.”

“Ah...”

Lily had only spoken with them briefly, but she still understood what Foll was trying to say.

“I think Shura is a very good person, and I’m very grateful,” Lily started, twiddling her fingers apologetically. “But honestly, I don’t really know if I love him. There isn’t really much time for love given my situation...”

“The more serious the situation, the more people fall in love. Or so I’m told.”

“Huh? I wonder about that... Sure, I’m very relieved to know he’s one of my people, but...”

But if asked whether she loved him, she hadn’t spent nearly enough time with him to answer. Seeing that Lily was troubled by this question, Foll slumped her shoulders.

“And here I thought I had the chance to catch sight of the moment a person falls in love.”

“There’s no use telling me that... Isn’t that something that comes like a jolt the moment your eyes meet or something?”

“Lily, are you a romanticist?” Foll asked, blinking in puzzlement.

“Well, *sorry!*” Lily yelled, turning red to the face.

“I don’t hate that,” Foll replied with a smile.

“You’ve got it all wrong...”

“Lily, have you been in love before?”

“Even if I have, I don’t remember.”

Lily wondered whether she’d ever experienced going red to the cheeks and having her heart pounding. She’d been under the impression that she didn’t have the time to admire such things, but thinking about it now, she felt something like envy toward the idea.

But with my body like this, it’ll never be reciprocated.

Manuela had told her that her scars were beautiful. Lily knew it was just a polite compliment, but it had also come across as somewhat serious, so she felt like she could affirm herself just a little. Still, coming to love a man was an entirely different story.

I did happen to know Shura from the very moment I woke up, but...

She couldn’t imagine herself in that kind of relationship with him. She felt like love was something to think about after deciding on her future course.

“What about you, Foll? Do you have a boy you like?”

“...I wonder... I don’t think there are any male dragons left in the world.”

Lily was taken aback.

Foll’s people are gone too...

Just like carbuncles, dragons had vanished from the world.

Foll’s family was so disparate in age and race. Even if they provided her warmth and affection, it didn’t overturn the fact that no dragons existed in the world anymore. Maybe, just maybe, that was the reason Foll had taken a liking to Lily. The thought pained Lily’s heart.

“If I meet someone cooler than Zagan, then maybe I’ll come to like them?” Foll muttered.

“That sounds like a really high bar.”

She’d only just met the man, but Zagan had a certain charisma to him. There was something about him that attracted others. It was pretty unlikely for

somebody to surpass that.

I wonder if I can become friends with him, at least...

Lily had no idea how to make friends or when one was considered a friend, but talking about love and eating sweets like this felt so very cozy. So long as Foll and Shura were with her, Lily felt like she could keep going.

Just then...

“Good evening, my lady. We meet again.”

A voice Lily had never heard before, but one she felt like she knew, called out to her. A chill ran down her spine, prompting her to stand up on reflex and look around. Before long, she spotted an elderly gentleman’s back leaving down an alleyway. She had nothing to base it on, but she instinctively knew he’d been the one to speak.

“Lily? What’s wrong?” Foll asked, an air of concern in her voice.

I can’t get Foll involved in this.

There’d been dark malice in the man’s voice. She couldn’t allow an honest girl like Foll to get mixed up with him.

“I’ll be right back!”

“Lily!”

Thus, Lily ran off on her own.



The back alley was like a labyrinth, but Lily somehow managed to find the elderly man’s back after charging in. He immediately turned down another path and Lily gave chase. Just as she turned the corner, she once more barely spotted his back vanishing down another turn.

She was being lured. She knew that, but for some reason, she felt compelled to chase him all the same. A panic-like impulse drove her to run after the old man. Before long, around the time she no longer had any idea which way she’d gone, the man finally stopped moving. Out of breath and unable to speak, Lily watched as he turned around elegantly and bowed.

“My lady, are you lost out here?” he asked before his lips twisted strangely. “I’m impressed. I thought I killed you when I cut your core jewel, but it seems that was a needless worry on my part. How truly splendid. I would expect nothing less of a comrade, Collector.”

Lily didn’t understand half of what he was saying. There was just one thing she knew for sure.

In other words, this person is the one who cut me...?

She grasped how dangerous a position she was in now. Regardless, she couldn’t allow the man to get anywhere close to Foll.

“Haaah... Haaah... Who are you...? You know me...don’t you?” she managed to squeeze out between ragged breaths.

“Hmm...? It seems we’re not on the same page,” the man said, wide-eyed in surprise. He then tilted his head before his mouth curved into a dreadful grin. “Well, I’ll refrain from prodding into your circumstances. Still, this is a godsend. My prey has willingly appeared before me. My second name, Lord of Murder, would be put to shame if I didn’t respond appropriately.”

He smoothly drew a sword from his waist. No, it wasn’t a sword. It had the shape of a hilt, but there was no blade.

Wait, it does have a blade. I mean, that’s the Hex Katana...

Lily felt her core jewel throb in pain. Several mysterious images then came to mind. She saw a monster that looked like it was made of paper scraps, her facing it, a woman being attacked in town, and the elderly gentleman talking to her like a close friend. And then...

“Aaah...”

The girl returned to her senses. A lunatic with a drawn blade was right before her eyes. Despite that, the girl fell to her knees, no longer able to stay on her feet.

“What’re you doing?! Dodge it!”

Someone scooped the girl off the ground, narrowly avoiding the incoming blade.

“Ari...stella?”

“It’s Dexia. How could I let you fight this asshole?”

It was the other twin who served as Foll’s attendant. The girl didn’t have a very good impression of her compared to the one she had of Aristella, though.

“Lord of Murder Glasya-Labolas...” Dexia mumbled, her hands trembling as she held the girl in her arms. “The old man was right. This blows.”

Dexia understood who this man was. She knew, but she had still come to save the girl from him all the same.

“I’ll buy you some time, so get the hell outta here. Just so you know, I’m not strong enough to do anything about someone like that, so I’m not gonna hold out very long.”

Dexia drew her chainsword and resolved herself to dying, overlapping with another scene in the girl’s mind.

“It’s all right, your big sis is a sorcerer, so she won’t lose to the bad guys!”

She’d run away, clinging to those words. And unfortunately, nothing remained afterward. Nothing at all. The girl squeezed Dexia’s arm tightly. Watching them, the elderly man shrugged.

“Hmm. Don’t you know it’s dangerous to stay here?”

“Shut it! Milady said she’d protect her! Like hell I’m gonna abandon her here!”

The girl was better off using Dexia as a shield and running away.

Ha ha, what’s going on? My legs won’t move.

And yet, she stood in front of Dexia as if to protect her.

“I’d rather you not show me such a gallant display...” the old man said, casting his eyes down sadly. He then turned the most repulsive expression toward them. “I won’t be able to hold back anymore!”

“Ugh! Run away!”

Dexia tugged on the girl’s arm, but it was far too late to get out of the man’s range. And just as the girl stretched out her arm, a fist plunged into the old

man's face.

“Guoh?!”

The fist kept up its momentum as it sank downward, slamming the man's face into the ground and gouging a trough through the earth as he tumbled violently.

“The thing I find most unforgivable in this world is someone getting in the way of my date with my bride.”

“Your Highness!” Dexia exclaimed.

Having grown tired of tailing Alshiera, Zagan had gone on a date with Nephy and now stood in the elderly man's way.





Shortly before that...

“Hmm. We can’t follow them if they’ve escaped into the church.”

Zagan had tailed Alshiera on her date, but the two had sneaked into the church. Barbatos and Chastille were being forced into a delicate situation, so Zagan wanted to avoid storming through her office on a pleasure trip. Well, it might’ve been too late for that, though.

Zagan looked up at the cathedral and moaned, while Nephy smiled.

“Hee hee hee, but Lady Alshiera appeared to be having fun. Or I suppose, rather than fun, it’s like a load has come off her shoulders. I’ve never seen her make a face like that.”

“Well, she’s had a pretty lousy life.”

It was a blessing to have someone she could relax around. She didn’t have all that much time left, after all.

“.....”

The two of them then realized that they were all alone. The tips of Nephy’s pointy ears turned slightly red, and Zagan was clearly flustered. Nevertheless, his decision was swift.

“Um, Nephy! Uh, I’m pretty tired of tailing Alshiera, s-so how about...going on a date?”

“W-With pleasure...”

He was sure Nephy had been feeling lonely too. Her expression softened into a smile and she took Zagan’s proffered hand. She then held it in the way they’d been taught the other day, like lovers did.

“Heh, ha ha...”

“Heh heh heh...”

The two had been so busy lately that they hadn’t even gotten the chance to sit down and talk, but that loneliness had dispersed entirely by the simple act of holding hands.

“S-So where shall we go?” Zagan asked.

“Um... Oh, I want to take a look around the water fountain over there.”

The fountain sitting in the plaza before them belonged to the church, which was technically an antagonistic organization to sorcerers. So long as Chastille was in charge, they didn’t really have to worry about that, but perhaps they’d been avoiding the place subconsciously. Zagan and Nephy walked over to a bench in the plaza—then came to a sudden stop.

“Master Zagan, that’s...”

Zagan was aware that an Archdemon had sneaked into Kianoides in the morning. However, Foll had brought Lily to him at the same time, so he’d left dealing with the matter for later. The barrier covering Kianoides had just detected this Archdemon coming into contact with Lily.

Their first date in a while had been interrupted, bringing a sad look to Nephy’s face.

“I’ll deal with it right away,” Zagan said, turning a gentle smile her way. “Just wait a little bit, Nephy.”

He then set off immediately.



“The thing I find most unforgivable in this world is someone getting in the way of my date with my bride.”

Using that as a reason, he’d even killed a man who would likely have become his friend. The elderly man who’d taken the full brunt of Zagan’s fist stood up as if nothing had happened and picked up his hat.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t my beloved comrade, Archdemon Zagan. How thoughtless of me. I’ve yet to greet you despite entering your domain. Glasya-Labolas. The world idolizes me as the Lord of Murder.”

“I don’t need your diplomatic drivel. All I want from you is your immediate death.”

Zagan faced him with severe hostility in his eyes, but the old man simply wiped the blood from his nose and shrugged.

“My, how cold. Are you so displeased that I’ve come to lay a hand on your companion?”

Zagan shifted his focus to Dexia and Lily. Dexia had fallen to her rear, while Lily had vanished before he knew it.

“I don’t give a damn who she is. Foll has decided to protect her. As such, it’s not my place to stick my neck into things.”

“No. You misunderstand. My target is that lady over there.”

His eyes were fixed on Dexia, who started as Zagan stretched out an arm to protect his subordinate.

Is his target Dexia or Aristella?

Either way, if Zagan took a step forward, he would put some distance between him and Dexia. Against an Archdemon, he wouldn’t be able to protect her for sure unless she was within arm’s reach.

“Then I have two more reasons I need you dead,” Zagan said.

“I regret to say this is work. I didn’t hear about two ladies sharing the same face, though. I need to be certain which is my target...” Glasya-Labolas muttered. Then, after taking a closer look at Dexia, he writhed in ecstasy. “After seeing such a gallant display, I’m so excited that I can’t hold back anymore!”

“G-Gross...”

The Archdemon’s lunacy was so intense that Dexia commented on reflex, despite trembling in fear.

“Ah... That’s enough. Just shut up,” Zagan said.

“Oh? I thought you’d understand me. That was what I expected of Archdemon Zagan, the man who mercilessly slaughtered Shere Khan’s army of ten thousand,” Glasya-Labolas replied, putting his hand to his chest as he spoke as if singing a song. “Why, there hasn’t been an Archdemon who’s killed so many people since Marchosias. I am called the Lord of Murder, but I don’t even come up to your ankles when it comes to sheer volume. Thus, I have come to hold a great deal of respect for you.”

Zagan had indeed killed ten thousand Nephilim. Be it by his own hand or by

his command, Zagan had killed them. He didn't feel the smallest ounce of regret over the act, but he didn't accept that fact lightly either.

"Now! Let me hear it!" Glasya-Labolas exclaimed with a smile. "Tell me what it feels like to steal ten thousand lives! How thrilling was it?! Wait, no, perhaps you felt anguish?! Or even a sense of emptiness?! I've come to see you so I can find out!"

Unfortunately for him, Zagan's answer to the question was extremely indifferent.

"...Nothing?"

The elderly man's eyes turned to saucers.

"What...did you just say...?"

"Nothing. I simply dealt with the rabble who opposed me. Why should I feel anything for each and every one of them?"

Zagan was an Archdemon—a sorcerer who remained composed no matter what atrocity or evil he committed. Thus, he couldn't be swayed by each little act. Those who garnered an Archdemon's wrath were brought to ruin—without exception. Zagan had simply to continue to prove that fact.

"Nothing...?" Glasya-Labolas muttered, his arms dangling by his sides. "Ten thousand lives...and you felt nothing...?"

His voice trembled as if the meaning of his entire life had been trampled on. Then, he screamed, "What do you take life for?!"

That came so far out of left field that Zagan doubted his own ears.

"You wouldn't think that would come from the Lord of Murder."

"...I am the Lord of Murder, the Archdemon who kills others for sport," Glasya-Labolas declared, gritting his teeth and trembling in anger. "And that is exactly why I pay respect to every life I nip in the bud."

He gripped the clothes at his chest tightly and continued speaking with theatrical gestures.

"Even simple joy is fine. Impulses born of resentment and anger are beautiful

too. A murder committed unintentionally after being driven into a corner is sweet like a first love. Killing crudely for the sake of money is so human I can sympathize with it. Seeing the twisted superiority complex of those who commit self-righteous murder in order to strike down evil sets my heart aflutter. The sight of a murderer standing in a daze with blood-soaked hands is so charming that I want to rub my cheek against theirs.”

The old man roared, stowing his invisible blade in its sheath.

“The reason doesn’t matter, but killing must come with emotion! That is the proper courtesy to show life. Why, I remember the last moments of every single person I’ve killed.”

Zagan didn’t understand the Lord of Murder’s words at all, so he let out a snort.

Contrary to appearances, he’s the overly passionate type, huh?

Not a single one of his words made sense, but it looked like Zagan’s answer was as unforgivable to him as getting in the way of a date with Nephy was to Zagan. Glasya-Labolas didn’t even seem to be aware of the existence of his so-called target anymore.

“Nephy. Take Dexia and get out of here,” Zagan said via telepathy.

Nephy bent at the waist and took Dexia into her arms like that didn’t even need to be said.

“May fortune be with you, Master Zagan,” she replied telepathically.

Thus, the Sorcerer Slayer and the Lord of Murder—two Archdemons who’d been granted their names for their ability to kill efficiently—clashed.



“What a dunce. He’s been picking fights with Archdemons left and right, so I figured he’d be a little warier.”

The girl who’d vanished from Dexia’s side was now in Archdemon Palace. This was an Archdemon’s base, but conveniently for her, all of the strongest sorcerers who were usually here were currently absent. What’s more, the girl had been cordially guided inside already. No matter how many traps or barriers

protected this place, this was no more than a vacant castle to the Collector.

The girl recalled the residents of the castle she'd met.

"Shere Khan really did lose it to get defeated by this peace-loving, carefree bunch."

She spoke with a sneer and pressed her hand against her chest. There was a stupid boy who sympathized with her and did everything he could once she'd told him she had no memories. There was a girl who'd jumped in front of Glasya-Labolas to protect her, despite being extremely suspicious of her.

They all make me wanna puke! They were all hypocrites. That was supposed to be the case, but for some reason, she felt excessive pain inside her chest. Clear droplets ran down her cheeks, and she couldn't get them to stop. And just as she easily arrived at the treasury's door and was about to place her hand on it...

"Lily. You can't go further than that."

The girl promptly wiped her face and turned to look over her shoulder.

"Aha, I'm surprised you found out. Despite saying you believed in me, you actually doubted me, right?"

A small dragon stood there out of breath. Seeing the tears in her amber eyes, the girl felt another prickle of pain in her chest. She brushed it off as a trick of the mind and smiled.

"Was I a little too mean?" she said. "But, well, this is reality. Isn't it a good lesson on how the world works? You shouldn't trust people so easily."

Foll opened her mouth, but no voice came out. She was making a look like she wanted answers.

"Are you angry? Or maybe disappointed?" the girl said with a grin. "But this is the kinda person I am to begin with. Poor you for getting tricked. I actually feel sorry for you, you know?"

Provocative words came out fluently. The sight of the innocent little girl in despair was so pleasant.

Yeah. This feels great. That was supposed to be the case, but the girl's core

jewel, no, something even deeper inside her chest, was unbearably painful. She was laughing, thinking of every reason to ridicule the little dragon that she could, when Foll finally raised her head.

“Nope. I believe in you, Lily.”

It was a childish and obstinate response. The girl meant to pity the dragon, but felt irritation instead.

“Oh, do you maybe think I’m being manipulated or threatened by someone? Too bad. I came here to break into this treasury from the very beginning.”

She cackled, then laid bare her chest.

“Archdemon Zagan’s famous for being a softhearted soul. If a severely injured Archdemon washed up on his shore, I figured he’d take them in before killing them. At least until he got a grasp of the situation. I actually managed to sneak in this far, so it’s a huge success.”

“Lily, did you get cut on purpose?” Foll asked in disbelief.

“That’s the gist of it... Well, I didn’t think he’d aim for my core jewel, so I nearly died for real there.”

That had been a miscalculation. If Foll hadn’t been the one to find her, she would’ve had no way of surviving. Because of that, she’d been in a hazy state where her memories had been a mess until recently.

But had Glasya-Labolas not seriously cut her down, they probably wouldn’t have been able to fool Zagan’s eyes. And yet, it also meant that Foll could kill her simply by undoing Prayer’s Shell. The girl’s core jewel was still cracked, and a gold glow still tied it all together.

So why am I telling her these things...? Did she want to see Foll cry? Despite all this, Foll maintained a sad expression.

“Lily. Don’t take such risks.”

“Don’t call me Lily! I’m Asmodeus!”

There was nobody in the world who could call her by that name anymore. On that day, on the day she abandoned her older sister to survive on her own, Lily had already died.

“I want to create a kingdom for the carbuncles. No, for all the oppressed.”

Her older sister had suddenly started studying sorcery for that purpose. Even though Asmodeus had been displeased that her older sister never played with her, she still looked up to her. That was why she’d studied sorcery too. But she couldn’t become her older sister.

Her sister, with such grand ambitions, had protected Asmodeus and died when the carbuncles’ village came under attack. Only Asmodeus, who had no worth in life, had remained.

“You’re Lily to me,” Foll said, shaking her head. “You vanished so that you didn’t get me involved, right? You protected Dexia too.”

“Oh come on. Don’t you get it? Me and that pervert are working together. I managed to sneak in here ’cause your oh so reliable Zagan is focused on him, right? That was the plan.”

Even after having things so thoroughly explained to her, Foll smiled.

“Lily. A truly cowardly sorcerer wouldn’t explain this stuff. They’d plead for sympathy and catch you off guard.”

Foll still sounded like she believed in her, which only fanned Asmodeus’s irritation all the more.

“Could you not act so conceited?” Asmodeus said. “Do you really think I need to go that far against a child? A brat with her head in the clouds needs to be taught about reality—like this!”

Talking more than this would just piss Asmodeus off. She pointed a finger at Foll and shot out a small black sphere. Blackest Black—the sorcery that could butcher even a demon in a single blow. The pitiful little dragon wouldn’t be able to scream before being devoured by it... That was supposed to be the case, at least.

“You’re the one acting conceited, Lily.”

Black jaws snapped shut over the sphere. An enormous dragon maw had manifested from Foll’s arm.

So that’s Black Dragon Marbas. This was the power that had elevated Valefor

to an Archdemon.

“I said I’d protect you, Lily. So I came to save you. If you go any further, Zagan will kill you. More importantly, you’re hurting yourself.”

Asmodeus’s irritation grew so intense that she was getting a headache.

“Foll. Being sure of victory with such puny power is the definition of being a child,” Asmodeus said as she calmly stood before the black dragon.

“—!”

She then stroked the dragon’s head like a pet, and Foll’s eyes shot open. That was all it took to crush the black dragon into nothingness. Regardless, Foll didn’t panic.

“Wise Dragon Orobas.”

“Hm...?”

In that instant, Asmodeus leaped back. Immediately following that, an enormous green jaw thrust up from the spot she’d been occupying. It gently landed on the floor, lining up next to the reconstituted black dragon by Foll’s side.

“Hmm? So there were two of those dragons.”

Now faced with the black and green dragons, Asmodeus recognized the young girl as an enemy on her level.

“I’m Apparition Valefor,” Foll declared. “The dragon who walks with the spirits of the departed.”

“I see. Collector Asmodeus. I’ll be forcing my way into the Archdemon’s treasury.”

Right before the door of Archdemon Palace’s treasury, two more Archdemons clashed.



“Prepare yourself!”

The first to step in was Glasya-Labolas. He had his grip on his sword but hadn’t drawn it from its sheath. Despite not knowing what the Archdemon was

planning, Zagan met the charge with his fist.

“—!”

In that instant, Zagan had a premonition of being cut down, and immediately plunged to the ground. A tuft of Zagan’s black hair fluttered in the air with a sharp ringing. Further behind him, the tops of the building slipped off their bottoms and collapsed. The scale of destruction was similar to Barbatos’s use of dislocating space. This was probably the power of the so-called Hex Katana. That wasn’t the main problem, though.

I didn’t catch the moment he drew his sword. Zagan excelled at reinforcing his physique, even among the Archdemons, but he hadn’t seen it. There was some kind of trick to this beyond simple speed.

“Hmm, so you dodged it,” Glasya-Labolas said.

Zagan somehow managed to hold back a cold bead of sweat, then arrogantly returned a smile.

“What a strange sword technique. It’s different from what the Angelic Knights use... Is that from a sword school in Liucaon?”

“Correct. I trained there a little in my younger days.”

Glasya-Labolas gripped his drawn sword with both hands, then swung it straight down. The slash was far sharper than Zagan imagined.

“Ugh...”

He took half a step back and arched his upper body to dodge, but then the Hex Katana seemingly maintained its speed and flipped back into an upward slash. Zagan didn’t dodge this blow and instead stepped forward with his opposing leg and struck with his fist. His chest tore open, sending a jet of blood into the air.

“Gah?!”

At the same time, Zagan’s fist dug into Glasya-Labolas’s ribs and sent him flying.

It takes me everything just to hit him. Is he actually better than Andrealphus in terms of pure swordsmanship? But if that was the case, the name of Sword God

wouldn't be Andrealphus's. There had to be some kind of trick.

Glasya-Labolas slammed into a wall, a look of admiration on his face.

"How terrifying. Not only did you stave off my Gekien, but you even struck back. This is a first for me, even including my time in active service."

"Active service...?"

The old man straightened his hat and elegantly bowed.

"Before becoming a sorcerer, I dabbled in the Angelic Knight business. Unfortunately, no Sacred Sword ever chose me, but instead, I was known as Sword Saint Labolas."

"I see. So you were a Sword Saint."

It wasn't publicized in the history of the Angelic Knights, but this was a title given to knights who surpassed the Archangels in skill. As far as Zagan knew, no Angelic Knight had been crowned with that title for centuries. There was no way a legendary knight of that caliber falling from grace and becoming an Archdemon would lead to a peaceful outcome for the world.

Or maybe that was also part of Marchosias's plan? Marchosias had intentionally set sorcerers and Angelic Knights at each other's throats. It was natural to assume he'd had some hand in getting a knight like that to switch sides. In that case, this man was something like Marchosias's secret weapon.

Glasya-Labolas appeared to have an overwhelming advantage in this fight, but he didn't approach again.

"And what of you? That evasion technique is quite something. It's as if you know before I even swing my sword... Yes, it's like you have foresight."

I figured he'd notice. Zagan covered one eye with his hand.

"I thought seeing the flow of mana meant I'd be able to read movements. I can't quite pull it off the way Silver-Eyes does, though."

During the battle with Shere Khan, the second-generation Silver-Eyed King had used his sight to read every last one of Zagan's movements to the finest detail. Having inherited those eyes, Zagan thought he'd be able to do the same thing, but it wasn't the type of skill once could acquire so quickly.

I somehow managed to “see” his movements, but I can’t devour sorcery while I do it.

Unless he was able to do both at once, this wasn’t very practical. Still, if he hadn’t partially read Glasya-Labolas’s movements through mana, the very first strike probably would’ve separated Zagan’s head from his shoulders.

He was way faster than what I read.

After thinking it through, Zagan suddenly came upon the opposite possibility. He’d been under the impression that his sight was incomplete because Glasya-Labolas had far surpassed his vision. But what if he’d actually seen right?

“Guess I’ll give it a try...”

Zagan lowered his hips deep and readied his fist. He then took a sharp breath and charged in.

“Mrgh!” Glasya-Labolas grunted and smoothly dodged Zagan’s full-body punch. “A terrifying thrust, but a fist is no match for a sword.”

The range between a fist and a sword was far too different. It was said that one needed three times the skill of a swordsman to get in range using one’s fists. Knowing this, Zagan was now convinced.

“I see. I’ve got a read on your damn sorcery. You stopped my flow of time, didn’t you?”

Andrealphus’s Void was acceleration sorcery that sped him up so much it looked like time stopped. Glasya-Labolas’s sorcery was the opposite. By slowing down everyone other than himself, he produced the illusion that time had stopped.

The old man put his hand to his chest in admiration.

“To see through it in but three exchanges. This is also a first. I call it Night Curtain.”

This was probably the reason Asmodeus had gotten cut down. Glasya-Labolas then readied his Hex Katana once more, as if declaring the time for questions and answers was over.

“Then let us see which of your ‘reading’ and my Night Curtain is superior.”

“I don’t feel the need for that,” Zagan said, shaking his head. “That sorcery...no, any sorcery, can’t kill me to begin with.”

“So it seems. That much is natural to assume given your second name.”

He had obviously been present when Zagan inherited his Sigil. He knew of Zagan’s ability as well. Naturally, that included its weaknesses.

“Nevertheless, I will cut you down here,” Glasya-Labolas declared. “A man like you mustn’t be allowed to live.”

This was a fight to the death between Archdemons. Even if his opponent was a lunatic, there was no way Zagan would laugh at his resolve.

“Come. I’ll take you on.”

Thus, Zagan clenched his fists once more.



“Allow me to give you a lecture on how Archdemons fight.”

With that preamble, Asmodeus fired another black sphere.

It’s definitely powerful, but Marbas and Orobas can stop it.

The black cursed dragon, Marbas, and the green dragon woven of Heaven’s Scale, Orobas. Yes, this Orobas was made using an application of Zagan’s Heaven’s Scale Dragon Form. As such, any sorcery or use of mana would be sucked dry by it.

Its jaws snapped over the black sphere, but a moment before they shut, the sphere turned to nothingness and burst.

“Archdemons are kings among sorcerers. In other words, reaching the very peak of sorcery is a requirement to becoming one. And this is what it means to reach the peak.”

The expanding space of nothingness was far faster than the snapping jaws, and it engulfed both dragon heads. The sphere that Foll had fended off once already had now defeated both Orobas and Marbas with ease.

“You don’t simply increase the precision and efficiency of your sorcery, but modify it so that it can be adapted to any situation on the spot, giving it a new

form if need be. Your dragons are certainly fast and strong, Foll, but they're useless if you destroy them before they can touch anything."

In other words, she'd just recreated the structure of her sorcery on the spot so that it would work against Foll.

"....."

Foll gulped. It was true that she was strong enough now to reach the realm of Archdemons. However, her knowledge was no match to what the Archdemons who'd served for hundreds of years had accumulated.

Zagan understood this better than anyone else and had still decided to destroy all thirteen Archdemons. That was why he always dragged his opponents into his own arena to beat them. He had to avoid fighting in his opponents' arenas at all costs. Foll was supposed to know this, but without realizing, maybe she'd been dragged into Asmodeus's arena.

Asmodeus held out a clenched hand, then stood her fingers up one by one. There was a black sphere floating above each one.

"Do make sure to stop these, okay? If you don't, the whole town will turn into a big hole," she said, then gently tossed the five spheres into the air. "Hades."

Her terrifying declaration rang in the air.

"Marbas, Orobas!"

Foll sensed that if these five spheres converged, everything would be over. Her instinct was right. She had no way of knowing this, but this was the sorcery that had sunk Paralynia, even in its incomplete state.

Foll's dragons manifested partially as claws and fangs to tear them apart...but the two dragons were torn apart instead.

Heaven's Scale shattered? There was only one reason that would happen. It simply meant that her opponent was much more powerful than she was, even after having her mana absorbed by Heaven's Scale.

What's more, the sorcery itself hadn't even been activated yet. The five spheres converged on one point, then revolved like binary stars to transform into a single entity. The world trembled. It looked like swelling darkness, but

this darkness had mass to it.

The small clump of blackness had only been the size of a firefly, but in the blink of an eye, it became large enough to fill the hallway. Upon contact with it, the floor and ceiling vanished without leaving the faintest hint of debris.

This is bad! Despite being both a dragon and an Archdemon, Foll felt fear. She immediately put both her hands together and thrust them out, the black and green dragons' jaws overlapping together as Foll took a deep breath.

"Aaaaaah!"

Three sets of jaws opened wide and unleashed their breath. Green, black, and blue mixed together, resonating and causing the light in the air to undergo fusion. The tremendous maelstrom of gamma rays drilled a crack into Hades, then finally shattered it.

"Gah!"

The shockwave was so tremendous that Foll was blown away to the very end of the hallway. She tumbled across the floor like a ball, then slammed into a wall and came to a stop.

"Aha! Wow! Dragon's breath! Hades is actually my ultimate sorcery, you know? When it comes to pure power, you really are at the level of Archdemons. Not that that has anything to do with sorcery."

Foll was covered in wounds from warding off a single spell, whereas Asmodeus didn't so much as have a scratch on her. She hadn't even taken a single step since dodging that very first attack. In other words, she even had complete control over the destruction of her own sorcery.

After clapping and laughing for a while, Asmodeus suddenly spoke very calmly.

"But Hades is the limit of what can be handled by human hands." With that, she tapped her fingers against her head. "It's not a problem of mana capacity. No matter how much mana you have, the brain cannot process sorcery beyond this. No matter how much you reinforce your body, no matter how much you perfect your theory, you can't advance beyond this point on your own. It's all so futile."

Asmodeus paused and held up her right hand.

“You get it already, right? An Archdemon is one who has surpassed the limits of an individual’s vessel. The Sigil of the Archdemon is the device to supplement that.”

She clenched her fist tight, and the Sigil of the Archdemon glowed. Acting in concert with that motion, multiple black spheres took shape in Asmodeus’s surroundings, resembling Foll’s Snowfield in scale.

One didn’t surpass humanity by becoming an Archdemon. Only by surpassing humanity was one granted a Sigil of the Archdemon. That was the difference between those who could and couldn’t become an Archdemon.

“Foll, can you surpass your limit?” Asmodeus said, looking straight at Foll with her star-accented pupils.

It was as if she was praying for Foll to overcome this situation, like she wished for Foll to surpass her limits. There was even a ring of sorrow to her voice.

Foll put her hand to her chest and cast her eyes down.

“Before meeting Zagan, I thought I’d get stronger so long as I got a Sigil of the Archdemon. Even after meeting Zagan, I thought I’d get stronger if I got bigger. I thought I was weak because I’m a child.”

Because of that, she’d ended up casting a curse on Zagan. But even after becoming little, Zagan had maintained his strength. That was when Foll had come to understand that having strength wasn’t simply about possessing or lacking power.

“I wanted to be stronger. At first, for revenge, then, to be acknowledged. But now, it’s different, Lily.”

Foll held up her right hand.

I want to be of use to Zagan and Nephy. That still hasn’t changed. But that wasn’t all anymore. There were Raphael, Lilith, and everyone else at the castle. There were the sorcerers who served Zagan. There were Dexia and Aristella. And now, there were the Nephilim too.

“I want to protect everyone I love.”

Foll then unleashed the power in the Sigil of the Archdemon.

“Grrrrrrr.”

Her body creaked from stress. Her heart pounded so violently it felt like it would burst. She put her hands to the floor, gasped for breath, and withstood the pain. Before long, the Sigil’s glowing settled down, and Foll steadily rose to her feet. Seeing her figure, Asmodeus’s eyes shot open.

“You...grew?”

At her full height, Foll’s eyes were now level with Asmodeus’s. Her baggy clothes now fit her perfectly. Her braided hair had come undone and was now long enough to reach the floor.

“If doing this will allow me to stop you, Lily, then I’ll happily use the Sigil of the Archdemon.”

This was the age manipulation sorcery Foll had once failed at even after borrowing Archdemon Zagan’s power. This was Foll’s answer.



“I see. An invisible blade is quite the troublesome weapon.”

Zagan bluffed with a smile, a crimson puddle already at his feet. He’d managed to predict Glasya-Labolas’s swordsmanship by reading the flow of mana and the movement of his body, but he hadn’t been able to get a read on the weapon’s range at all. What’s more, the blade had an abnormal cutting edge. Zagan had been carved up countless times trying to close in to reach him with his fists.

“Master Zagan...”

Nephy’s voice trembled, but Zagan brushed back his disheveled hair and smiled back at her.

“Sorry for worrying you, Nephy. It’s over.”

The elderly man slipped down a wall and to the ground, leaving a large red smear on it. Just how many times had Zagan struck him? He’d never even hit Barbatos this much. Someone of Kimaris’s level might have been able to withstand it, just barely.

That so-called Hex Katana just wouldn't break no matter how many times I hit it too. It was a terrifying weapon.

Zagan turned on his heels, then came to a stop.

"Give it up. I have a date to get back to. Stinking of blood will ruin it, so I'm letting you live. If you get in my way, I'll tear your right arm off, Sigil and all."

Glasya-Labolas was trying to get back to his feet using his Hex Katana as a cane. Zagan had obviously hit him with the intent to kill. The reason this man was still alive was simply because he was strong. In other words, Zagan hadn't been able to kill him using his fists. In that case, he was fine with coming to an agreement for now. Any villain deserved at least one chance to do things over, after all.

Nevertheless, the Lord of Murder brandished his Hex Katana.

"Will you...keep killing people...like that? I cannot...allow it."

It had something to do with a murderer's sense of aesthetics. Zagan didn't really understand, but he was apparently something like this man's sworn enemy.

"Fine. Let's settle this. Nephy, wait just a little longer for me."

"As you wish, Master Zagan."

Nephy bowed gracefully, and Zagan turned to face Glasya-Labolas once more, when suddenly, a dark gray chain clanged between them.

"That's enough, Glasya-Labolas. *He* still needs you."

Zagan shifted his focus to the new voice, where he saw a woman floating in the air. He could tell by the Sigil on her right hand that she was an Archdemon.

"Seriously, how many Archdemons plan on entering my domain?"

He let out a sigh as the woman turned toward him. However, her eyes were covered by a bulky charm, so he couldn't really see her face.

"Good day, Archdemon Zagan. I am Astrologian Eligor. I'm sure you have your heart set on tormenting this man, but could you let him go? We have no intention of bothering you...for now, that is."

“I’m pretty sure he doesn’t share your opinion,” Zagan said, pointing at Glasya-Labolas with his chin.

“Then I’ll—gh?!”

The old man’s sword flashed. He swung at the empty air, but the woman above him—Eligor—suddenly swayed before falling to the ground. He’d apparently cut the sorcery that was keeping her afloat.

“What do you think you’re doing...?”

“My lady, when a gentleman decides to stake his life on something, it is not your place to intrude uninvited.”

This man was apparently intent on fighting Zagan even if it meant making enemies of his allies.

“I don’t get it,” Zagan said. “What the hell drives you to want to fight me so badly?”

“Because you so casually erased ten thousand lives. Life must not be taken lightly.”

“Who’s taking it lightly? What kind of subject will follow a king who doesn’t carry the responsibility of the lives he trampled?”

“...What?”

The old man inclined his head, still holding his Hex Katana ready to thrust. Zagan then recalled the answer he’d given him not too long ago.

“I simply dealt with the rabble who opposed me. Why should I feel anything for each and every one of them?”

He then realized he may have been somewhat skimpy on words.

“I killed the ten thousand Nephilim because they were my enemies. As an Archdemon, they were enemies I had to exhaust all my strength to defeat, so I killed them.”

With that, the old man’s mouth popped open. His face then contorted strangely.

“Hmph, what a cruel man,” he said. “Had you said that from the beginning, I

wouldn't have had to wield my sword so fruitlessly."

That was apparently enough to appease him. He picked up his tattered top hat, then elegantly put it back on. After that, he turned on his heels and took one last look over his shoulder.

"Oh yes. You'd best return quickly. She's quite the tenacious sorcerer, so I'm sure she's scrounging through your treasury about now."

"There's no need for that," Zagan said, shaking his head. "Our daughter is the type to accomplish whatever she claims she'll do. Rushing back there is no different from violating the trust we have in her."

The old man shrugged, then took his hat off one last time and bowed.

"Until we meet again."

With that farewell, his figure crumbled into black ash and vanished. Before Zagan knew it, Eligor had also disappeared.

A troublesome bunch has gotten involved with us. Even as he grimaced, he turned to Nephy.

"Then shall we get back to our date?"

It seemed so inappropriate given the circumstances, but Nephy still nodded with a knowing smile.

"Yes, with pleasure."



Around the time the battle above ground was coming to an end, a grown-up Foll was facing off against Asmodeus in front of Archdemon Palace's treasury. Asmodeus had spoken of using the Sigil to supplement one's vessel and utilize power beyond one's means. In contrast, Foll used it to expand her vessel itself.

Still, even using the Sigil of the Archdemon, sixteen is about my limit.

That was just about the same appearance as Asmodeus. In human terms, that was only five years of growth, but for a dragon, it was closer to a hundred.

I can maintain this for five minutes at most.

If Foll didn't defeat Asmodeus in that time, she would lose.

“So I’ll use this too—Mercurius.”

What manifested at Foll’s command wasn’t sorcery, but a staff that somewhat resembled a spear. It was longer than Foll was tall, even in her new form. The tip of the staff split into two smooth ends. Its form suggested that it had no use other than as a bludgeoning tool. This was what Zagan had given her before sending her off to the capital of the oppressed.

“Hmm... What’s that?”

“Zagan said it’s a staff. Mercurius, my new weapon.”

Foll twirled it in her hand and it whistled delightfully.

Does Lily know what this is?

Asmodeus maintained a composed smile, but when she saw the staff, her expression stiffened for just an instant.

In that case, I’m sure it’ll work.

With that thought in mind, Foll readied her staff.



“Here I come, Lily.”

“Seriously, you’re such a troublesome girl,” Asmodeus said with a slight air of irritation. Though, there was also a hint of praise in her voice.

“Please, Marbas!” Foll screamed as she kicked off the ground.

In an instant, a black dragon large enough to fill the hallway manifested and charged at Asmodeus. The black dragon created by the teenage-bodied Foll was fundamentally in a different dimension when it came to mana density and strength. At this point, even the former Archdemon candidates would have needed to exhaust all their wiles and strength to defeat it as a group.

“Trying to use a smokescreen?”

Black spheres fluttered about and swooped down on the dragon one after the other.

“Graaaaaah!”

The black dragon roared. Everywhere a sphere touched went missing as if scooped out with a spoon. Each hole was only the size of a human head—that in itself was unbelievable destructive power—but with ten to twenty of those spheres at play, the scale of destruction was on an absurd level. In the blink of an eye, the black dragon’s entire upper body was erased and it collapsed to the ground.

Even this Marbas can’t get anywhere close to her.

However, using the time the black dragon served as her shield, Foll managed to get in range.

“Snowfield.”

Flowers of light danced in the air, surrounding both Asmodeus and her black spheres.

First, I need to get rid of Blackest Black... Foll thought as she thrust Mercurius forward, her lips quivering minutely.

“Divine Echo.”

The sonic impact swallowed Asmodeus.

“Gah!”

For the first time in this battle, Asmodeus was blown off her feet and coughed out blood. At that point, even the black spheres surrounding her wobbled and twisted out of existence.

“I got through—”

“Hey now, don’t drop your guard.”

The moment Foll believed she’d gotten a good hit in on Asmodeus, a black sphere shook right in front of her nose.

“Ah!”

Foll threw her body to the ground, falling backward, and just barely escaped the range of the sorcery. She then braced herself for the impact against the hard floor...when someone gently caught her.

Foll looked up as Asmodeus smiled down at her. The same girl who was supposed to have been blown away was somehow right before her.

“Ha ha ha, you’re quite the beauty in this state, Foll. I bet you’d be very charming with some pretty jewels on. You’re totally worth snatching up.”

“Agh!”

Asmodeus kicked Foll in the back, sending her slamming against the ceiling.

She rode Blackest Black’s gravity?

That was how she’d moved so far in an instant. Foll fell back to the ground, and the staff she’d dropped settled neatly into Asmodeus’s hand.

“Hmm. So this is Mercurius? I thought it looked like a tuning fork, but that’s exactly what it is, huh?”

Asmodeus observed the staff and twirled it around.

“That sorcery just now, Divine Echo, was it? I didn’t think it had the power to break my Blackest Black, but this tuning fork resonated with it to amplify its strength, huh? It truly is the perfect weapon for you, Foll.”

With that, Asmodeus flashed a grin.

“I rather like it. Mind if I take it? Well, even if you say no, I’ll just do whatever I want. I’m a thief, after—gah?!”

A scaly tail smashed against the side of Asmodeus’s face. The sudden attack sent her crashing against the wall. Then, before she could regain her footing, Foll snatched Mercurius back from her.

“That hurt. It’s horrible to hit a girl in the face, you know?”

“I don’t want to hear that from someone who tried to blow my head off.”

“Ha ha ha, I believed you would dodge it, Foll.”

Foll wondered what this girl’s true intentions were. If Asmodeus had seriously wanted to kill her, she would’ve done so with her first attack. She was acting scornfully while trifling with Foll, but in truth, there were subtle signs that she was guiding Foll like a teacher.

What was the Collector’s objective to begin with? If she was here to simply steal something, wouldn’t she be able to do a better job of it once she’d regained her memories?

Is Lily maybe hesitating over something?

Perhaps that was why her behavior seemed so erratic.

“Tell me, Lily,” Foll said, reaching a hand out. “What’s your objective? What’s in the treasury?”

“Will you gift wrap it for me if I tell you?”

“I could,” Foll answered immediately, leaving Asmodeus speechless. “I’m similar to you. So if it’s something you need, Lily, I want to help.”

For some reason, Asmodeus ground her teeth as if holding back her anger.

“Hmm... That makes me happy. Then let me tell you what I want,” she said before putting on a chilling smile. “Spirit Blood. I became an Archdemon to collect every last one of those gems in the world.”

Foll had heard of that gem before. Zagan had called it a cursed jewel. That was why he’d never tried using one for anything even though it was available to him. In that case, it was fine to hand it over. That was what Foll believed, but...

“But you know, just taking them isn’t enough. Anyone who has ever gotten hold of one needs to suffer. That’s why I’ve even gone around asking to have people in possession of them killed.”

“Why...?” Foll asked, her voice trembling pathetically.

“Huh? I figured you’d realize after hearing this much...” Asmodeus replied as she cocked her head curiously, then undid her shirt’s buttons and revealed her chest. “*This* is what everyone calls Spirit Blood.”

A cracked crimson gem was embedded in Asmodeus’s chest: a carbuncle’s core jewel.

Does that mean all Spirit Blood gems were stolen from carbuncles?

Foll could understand wanting to retrieve them all, but she didn’t see this as enough of a reason to torture people simply for owning one.

“Is it revenge that drives you?” Foll asked.

“Ha ha ha, if only it was that simple. If so, it’d be over after rampaging until I’m satisfied,” Asmodeus said, turning her gloomy and star-accented eyes toward Foll. “We’re similar. That’s what you said, right? But see, I’m different from you.”

Asmodeus clenched her teeth, then screamed, “Even after dying, we carbuncles have had our dignity trampled on!”

These two were probably the last dragon and carbuncle in the world. Shura was technically a carbuncle too, but strictly speaking, he was a Nephilim who should never have existed.

“I bet you’ve never seen a corpse that’s had its core jewel gouged out. Well, I’ve seen plenty. Everyone’s faces were frozen in agony. In most cases, the carbuncles were still alive when their core jewels were stolen. They say doing it that way makes the mana richer, so all those craven creatures that hunt us do it without a care in the world even though it’s just superstition.”

Asmodeus squeezed the pendant hanging over her chest tightly as she continued speaking.

“My big sister was a rare species like me, so they even went as far as gouging

her eyes out. Every carbuncle suffers in their last moments. All of them screamed for help, saying they didn't want to die as they were tortured to death."

And yet, Asmodeus didn't call her acts of violence revenge.

"That's why I have to grant the same suffering to all those who covet Spirit Blood. I need to teach them all that even so much as touching one will grant them the most horrible of deaths."

"Why? Even without doing that, you have more than enough strength to retrieve all the core jewels."

"Foll, please don't disappoint me," she said, her voice endlessly cold. "Aren't jewels pretty? No matter how expensive or rare they are, humans crave jewels. They even kill for them. Oh, please don't say they'd understand if I talked them out of it, okay? We went extinct because nobody would listen."

Foll finally felt like she understood what Asmodeus was saying.

"That's why you made them out to be cursed jewels? So that nobody would even want them? So long as one person out there covets one, it isn't over."

"If you understand, then story time is over."

"I don't get it, Lily," Foll said, shaking her head. "Will that bring you happiness?"

"Happiness...? Ha ha ha, that's an unfamiliar word to me."

Nothing Foll said could stop Asmodeus anymore.

Is it too late for Lily to stop?

How many centuries had she been doing this as the Collector? Meeting Foll as Lily had shaken Asmodeus somewhat, but that wasn't enough to stop her after all these years.

No, even Lily's a normal girl. She just ended up like this because she had to get stronger... Yeah, I get it now. Lily is similar to Zagan.

Zagan had happened upon Nephy...and Foll had happened upon the two of them. However, Asmodeus was alone. Carbuncles were extinct, after all.

“I still believe in you, Lily,” Foll said, raising her head with determination.

“Huh...?”

“On a fundamental level, a person’s true nature doesn’t change. Even if they lose their memories, the record carved into the soul doesn’t vanish.”

As such, Foll extended her right hand once more.

“Both the Lily I met, and the woman before me, are Lily. I want to be friends with you.”

That was why Foll chose to fight. Even if her words failed to reach Asmodeus, she’d get through to her by force.

“I see,” Asmodeus said. It almost looked like she was praising Foll with her smile. “In that case, show me you can stop me!”

Countless black spheres manifested around Asmodeus and converged over her head.

“Sorcerous Singularity, Calamitous Moon of Hades.”

A black moon rose in the underground castle.

“I’ll return everything to nothingness. This is the last of my power.”

Foll knew better than anyone that her words were no exaggeration.

Its power rivals Starfall.

It was comparable to the god-killing power created by the ultimate vampire, Alshiera. The only choice to stop this was to slam Starfall against it. That was why Foll understood. This fight would only be settled with someone’s death. Maybe she could run away from it, but if she did, Foll’s words would never truly reach Asmodeus.

Foll gripped Mercurius, and just as she was about to weave Snowfield once more...

“Stop, Foll!”

“Raphael?!”

Now she remembered. This man was the only one who’d stayed in

Archdemon Palace so that he could prepare dinner. A Sacred Sword tangled with Mercurius and jammed it into the ground.

“This has nothing to do with you! Don’t barge in now!” Asmodeus exclaimed.

“Angelic Confession Metatron.”

A knight made entirely of flames charged at the Calamitous Moon, but it was far too powerless to destroy it. The knight didn’t even try to hold its ground as the moon swallowed it whole. However, using his Confession as a sacrificial pawn, Raphael got right in front of Asmodeus.

But his Sacred Sword!

Raphael had let go of his weapon to stop Foll. However, he had something else ready.

“Huh?”

Clenched in his extended fist was a crimson jewel—Spirit Blood. A red light spread out and filled the hallway.



“Hey, sis, what do you even plan on doing by learning sorcery?”

As the girl got absorbed in yet another grimoire, her little sister asked her that question with a sullen look. She was such a cute little sister. The girl wanted the world to become a place where her sister could continue smiling like this. She knew reality was harsher than that, however.

Another carbuncle village has been destroyed.

Their village was probably next. The adults were looking for somewhere to evacuate to, but the girl figured it was useless. Humans were tenacious, so even if the carbuncles ran away, they’d catch up one day.

In that case, I at least want the power to protect Lily.

However, there was no point in making her little sister cry in the process. Left with no other recourse, she shut her grimoire and kept her sister company.

“Look, isn’t it pretty?”

The little sister put a lily, a beautiful white flower that matched her hair, in

the girl's hair and brushed her head.

"We're under attack!"

The end had suddenly arrived. Someone captured outside had apparently revealed the village's location. They'd probably been killed after talking too.

Fires engulfed the entire village in no time, and humans were waiting along the escape routes. Even when carbuncles were burned to death, their core jewels remained. Thus, they had no intention of letting a single carbuncle get away.

The village had a secret passage built for just such an occasion. Only a few villagers knew of its existence, but the girl's parents had told her about it right before they were killed. The girl and her little sister were the only ones who managed to reach the passage. They were the youngest siblings in the village, so everyone had helped them get away.

But someone has to stay behind to stall them...

If they found out about the secret passage, the invaders would come charging down it immediately.

"Sis, are we gonna die?"

The girl hugged her frightened little sister tight.

"Lily, do you remember your big sis's dream?"

"Your dream? To make a kingdom for everyone...?"

"Yes. I'm sure there's a kingdom out there for the oppressed. So Lily, I want you to go find it."

With that, she pushed the grimoire she'd been reading into her little sister's hands.

"Your big sis is going to go save everyone, so you go call for help, Lily."

"I don't wanna. You come too, sis."

"I'm gonna create a kingdom, remember? In that case, these villagers will be my first citizens. What kind of queen would I be if I didn't protect them?"

The girl somehow managed to hide her trembling arms.

“So you have to live, Lily. Even if you’re the last one, your core jewel can’t be stolen so long as you live. Survive and laugh at them for chasing you. Isn’t it thrilling to think about a bunch of adults failing to capture one little girl?”

She pushed her little sister’s back.

“It’ll be fine. Your big sis is a sorcerer, so I’m not gonna lose to the bad guys.”

She shut the secret passage’s door, and her little sister ran off. That was when someone kicked down the door to the building. Several men came charging in. The girl used the sorcery she’d learned to send one flying, and then a second, but she was still a novice. And so, it didn’t take that long to capture her.

Dying is pretty scary, huh...?

But if she screamed, her little sister would surely return. Thus, there was no chance in hell she would, no matter what happened to her.

“Live and find happiness, Lily.”

Those were her last words.

Epilogue

“So? Did you steal what I asked for, Asmodeus?”

Asmodeus had returned to Marchosias’s castle. Taking a glance at the corner of the room, she spotted a horribly wounded Lord of Murder, a terrifyingly moody Astrologian, and the slit-eyed man. She turned to the young man wearing round glasses and— “It wasn’t as you promised, Marchosias. Mercurius wasn’t even there.”

—she shamelessly played dumb.

“...What’s the meaning of this?”

“Like hell I know. Maybe he gave it away or moved it somewhere else? Either way, there was nothing like Mercurius in the treasury...and I can’t really steal something that isn’t there.”

The young man in glasses stared at Asmodeus with sharp eyes.

“I do believe you know this already, but let me say it again. I show no mercy to those who betray me.”

“Ha ha ha, we’ve got someone here that can identify lies, don’t we?”

Asmodeus turned to Astrologian. The young man signaled her with his eyes and Astrologian simply shrugged in response.

“She didn’t lie.”

“Right?”

It was true that Mercurius hadn’t been inside the treasury. He hadn’t asked about it being in Foll’s hands, so Asmodeus technically hadn’t lied.

“But she’s hiding something,” Astrologian added.

This Asmodeus expected. She looked back at Astrologian incredulously.

“Let me ask you then, are there any sorcerers out there who aren’t hiding something?”

“I wasn’t playing with words,” Astrologian replied with a sharp look.

“Well, not much we can do about something that isn’t there,” the slit-eyed man said after coughing to gain attention. “In that case, we’ll have to revise the plan. As I keep saying, there’s no time.”

“You don’t have a way of tracking it?” Asmodeus asked. “You made it, didn’t you?”

“I sent you out there because there isn’t a way,” the young man in glasses answered. “And there’s no time to make a substitute either. We have no choice but to look for it.”

“Hmmm...”

In that case, it was probably safe.

“We’ve got demons crawling out too. It’s quite the nuisance,” the slit-eyed man said, scratching his head.

“Well, I’ll at least handle some demons for you. You’re paying me and all,” Asmodeus said, then stretched out her arms in an exaggerated manner. “Anyway, you don’t need to worry about me betraying you. You’ve got a firm grasp of my weakness, after all.”

“Such impudence,” the young man replied.

Asmodeus gave him a casual wave and walked off.

Seriously, I’m done crossing dangerous bridges like this, okay?

She looked down at the crimson jewel in her hand and let out a sigh.



“Sis!”

Once the red light died down, Asmodeus weakly sank to the floor. The Calamitous Moon of Hades had vanished. She’d canceled her sorcery the moment she saw the Spirit Blood because there was a risk of sucking the gem in.

Is that gem Lily’s sister’s...?

Even Foll had witnessed the memories inside that red light.

Asmodeus sat on the ground in a despondent daze, and Raphael forced the Spirit Blood into her hand.

“H-Huh? You’re...giving it to me?”

“It belongs to you, doesn’t it? If that still doesn’t please you, then I’ll take on the damn role of being made an example of. I’m the butler here, so I’ve been caring for that gem.”

“Raphael!” Foll exclaimed to try to stop him.

The old butler turned to look at her as if to cheer her up.

“Foll, my life was given to me by you and Orobas. It should have ended long ago.”

However, Asmodeus showed no signs of attacking him.

“Sis, I’m sorry it took me this long... But I still don’t get it. What *is* happiness?”

She embraced the crimson jewel dearly, tears spilling from her eyes in large droplets. Foll somehow managed to rise to her feet and walk up to Asmodeus. Having used up the power of the Sigil of the Archdemon, she was back in her original form.

“Lily, do you still need to make an example?”

“Ha ha ha... What to do...? I kinda don’t feel like it anymore.”

The ghastly expression she’d had moments ago was completely gone, as if she’d been possessed by something at the time.

“I’m similar to you,” Foll said, reaching a hand out to Asmodeus once more. “But I’m also different. That’s why I want to learn more about you.”

“Foll...”

“Lily. Come back with me. I want to be friends with you.”

Asmodeus reached out as if to take Foll’s hand...then flicked the little dragon’s forehead.

“Ow...”

“Do I look like such a cheap woman? If that was all it took for me to stop

being the Collector, I wouldn't have gone around gathering core jewels to begin with." Asmodeus rose to her feet, then muttered as if suddenly remembering something, "Oh, but I didn't steal this one; it was given to me. I guess that means I have to offer something as a trade."

"Huh...? What do you mean?"

"Before being the Collector, I'm still a sorcerer. I'll pay the proper price for any trade. When Shere Khan offered me three Spirit Blood gems, I traded him a dozen Hex Blades and the Hex Katana."

"Then you'll be my friend?" Foll asked in a hurry.

"I told you I'm not that cheap."

"Then what?"

Asmodeus fiddled with her silver hair awkwardly, then answered, "Information. Don't you want some? Like...who hired me?"

Raphael stared at her in wonder.

"My client called himself Marchosias," Asmodeus continued, pointing at the staff in Foll's hand. "He told me to steal Mercurius. I don't know why he wants it, but I bet it's nothing good."

"Lily..."

"Yup. Now we're even. I'm not saying anything else, and I'm not returning sis's core jewel!"

Just as Asmodeus turned on her heels to leave, Foll called out to her once more and said, "Lily."

"...What?"

"Come back anytime you want. I'll be waiting."

"...Hmph!"

With that, Asmodeus vanished.

I'll wait as long as you want.

Foll then put her hand to the treasury's door.

“It’s a good thing Lily didn’t open this.”

The treasury had been emptied, having been repurposed not too long ago for Zagan’s personal use. All the treasure that had been there had been moved elsewhere. The only ones allowed inside now were Foll, Nephy, and Raphael. Even Barbatos couldn’t sneak in. A powerful barrier protected it. Foll opened the door just a little to take a look, and inside...there were countless pictures of Nephy and Foll. They were created by using sorcery called Memorandum, which projected one’s memories into a physical image.

This is what Zagan considers his treasure, after all.

There was just one little problem with that. He was too embarrassed to have anyone witness this. If anyone saw it, Zagan would devote everything he had to killing them. That was why Foll couldn’t let Asmodeus inside.

“Tired...”

Foll plopped onto her butt, then leaned against Raphael’s leg and fell asleep.



“Ladies and gentlemen. Today is Nephy and Nephteros’s birthday. Let us celebrate to our hearts’ content.”

One month later, in Archdemon Palace’s entrance hall, Zagan successfully held Nephy’s birthday party. Nephteros was being treated as her twin now, so this was also her birthday.

Unlike Zagan’s birthday, which had taken place right after the battle with Shere Khan, nobody here was injured, making it a far more peaceful affair. Right after declaring the start of the party, Zagan ran over to Nephy and handed her a gift. He’d apparently worked out an entire program, but his desire to give this to her had taken precedence.

“Th-Thank you very much, Master Zagan.”

It was a watch. Andrealphus’s Void had been worked into it. Foll had handed over the Spirit Blood to Asmodeus, so it’d been quite the stormy journey to get it working, but in the end, Zagan had found some substitute.

As for Nephteros, Richard had gifted her a pair of earrings. They were gold,

matching her dark skin very well.

Horse Head's birthday ended up turning into something crazy, though.

Well, Zagan and the others had worked it out smoothly, so it didn't really matter.

As Foll continued watching the party unfold, a boy walked up to her.

"Shura? What's wrong?"

The Nephilim weren't being holed up inside the capital of the oppressed at all times. They were now allowed to be brought out, starting with those who didn't have much hostility toward Zagan. After being informed that today was Nephy's birthday party, Shura had requested to come along.

Shura looked around the room restlessly, then slumped his shoulders.

"I just thought maybe I'd get to see Lily," he said.

"It's okay, she'll definitely come back."

Shura had been rather disheartened to learn that Lily had vanished without a word. He'd even gone around looking for her without telling Foll.

"You're right," Shura said with a nod, then smiled as if to convince himself. "If you say that, I have to believe she will."

"Mmm... I believe it."

There'd been no contact from Asmodeus since then. Nevertheless, Foll was pretty sure she was out there cheerfully stealing something or other. It would have been nice if she refrained from enacting retribution on those who possessed core jewels, though. And as those thoughts passed fondly through her mind, she noticed Zagan and Nephy talking about something.

"A-Actually, now that you're an Archdemon, I think you need a second name, Nephy."

"Y-Yes... Huh? A second name?"

"Mhm. If you're fine with it, would you accept one as a birthday present?"

That made sense. Nephy was practically unknown as a sorcerer, and most of her power came from celestial mysticism, so she still didn't have a second

name. Foll was brimming with interest in this topic, so she immediately got closer to the two of them. Though, pretty much all the guests in the hall had gathered as well.

“Gah! Quit crowding us! I want to ask Nephy first!”

“M-Master Zagan, I’m fine with it, so...”

Zagan cleared his throat, then cut to the chase.

“How about...Fairy Queen Nephelia?”

Nearly everyone present knew that was the second name of the one who’d created the capital of the oppressed—Titania.

“Is it really all right for me to take my mother’s second name?” Nephy asked, putting her hand to her heart as her ears quivered.

“Yeah, I asked Orias already. So long as you’re fine with it, she’d like you to use it.”

“Thank you very much,” Nephy said with a beaming smile. “I’ll cherish it!”

“Yeah!”

A lot had happened, but it looked like Nephy’s birthday was a success. Foll plopped down onto a nearby chair, picked up a glass of juice with both hands, and gulped it in one go. She then took a deep breath and finally let the tension out of her shoulders.

“I’m glad my first job went well.”

And just like that, Archdemon Valefor’s first big job ended safely.

Afterword

It's been a long time, everyone! I've come to deliver *An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride Volume 15*. My name is Fuminori Teshima!

Last time, we had Zagan's birthday, and this time it's Nephy's! But...things only just finished with Shere Khan, and Archdemons we haven't seen yet are plotting something. What's more, it's come to light that Zagan inherited his awkwardness from his mother.

Believing that Zagan and Nephy won't make any progress over the next thousand years if her birthday isn't a success, freshly minted Archdemon Foll sets off on her first job!

The curtains rise on a new arc, so after fifteen volumes, Foll finally debuts on the cover.

We've talked about putting Foll on the cover many times before, but it just never meshed with the main story, so we didn't go with it.

We didn't just go with her for the cover because the opportunity came up this time, though. We had four rough designs for the cover, and I worried greatly over which to go with. There was one with Foll in her second form too, so I agonized over why I had to pick only one. I wanted to see all of them! I wanted *you* to see all of them!

Speaking of Foll, she's got a new outfit this time. Isn't that military dress nice? I suffer from a strange disease where I have a fit if I don't have a regular intake of military dresses, so I really wanted to see what COMTA would draw and had her wear one.

I admit I had an ulterior motive. If I made her wear one, I'd definitely get to see an illustration of her in it. Still, even without that, the military dress definitely fits Foll in this arc, especially in her second form. I had several designs presented to me, so it was really fun picking one!

Oh, I have a report on recent affairs for you. Word on the street says the

game *Elden Ring* involves lots of dying. I'm finding it really fun! I'm actually bad at games. Why, I can barely beat *Mario*, and I'm pretty much a sandbag for my children at *Smash Bros*. But for some reason, I decided to try out a game that people said would definitely be hard. They didn't even need it to come out before declaring that.

I've seen videos of a game called *Bloodborne* before and was fascinated by the ruined world, so when I heard a new title was being released by the same developers, it quickly ended up in my cart. Incidentally, I bought a PS5 just to play it.

I died over ten times every single time I found a new boss, but each time I felt like I could have won if I had just worked a little harder, so I kept challenging them without thinking about it. Anyway, one thing led to another, and I'm now on my third playthrough. One more ending and I'll have the platinum trophy. It's so fun!

Let me talk a bit about the new characters. In truth, including Foll's new military dress, I had more than ten new character designs drawn up. Thank you so much for your hard work, COMTA (full-force genuflect)!

First, Asmodeus. I came up with this character around volume 9, when Zagan and Nephy were on their (fake) honeymoon. While writing about the love birds waltzing into the church's treasury like they were sightseers, I wanted to try writing about a phantom thief.

I'm pretty sure you can tell from the character design, but I've filled her with all sorts of quirks: silver hair, purple eyes, superficial speech, a dark background, *etc*. On that note, she took up about half the new character designs I had made, so she's a real feast for the eyes. From an author's perspective, I'm really satisfied now that she's finally been unveiled.

Next, Glasya-Labolas. He's modeled after a British gentleman. I wanted to try writing about a murderer with a weird sense of aesthetics. As such, this one's packed with a bunch of insane quirks. On that note, don't you find that a British gentleman using a katana just unexpectedly works? As such, the Hex Katana that shows up in this volume was created because I wanted him to wield it.

Now then, allow me to thank everyone who helped with this volume. To my

chief editor A, sorry for turning in so many pages this time around. To COMTA, who drew so many character designs for me. (Big Foll is the best!) To the manga artist and the one doing the spin-off drafts, Hako Itagaki. To the manga artist for the spin-off, Momo Futaba. To the editors for both manga. To everyone involved in the cover design, proofreading, publicity, and everything else. To my children, who made me sweets and helped with the chores. And to you, my dear readers, who are holding this book in your hands as we speak.

Thank you very much!

April 2022: On a Spring Day with a Light Drizzle Outside

—Fuminori Teshima

Bonus Short Stories

The Innocent Flower Doesn't Notice

"How are you feeling, Lily?" Shura asked.

"It hurts a lot less today, so I feel much better," Lily answered as she sat up in bed.

"That's good. Let me know if you need anything. I'll do whatever I can."

"Thank you, but I'm all right. I still don't know much about myself, after all."

The way she smiled so gallantly was the very picture of a beautiful girl cursed with misfortune, and Shura clasped his chest as he felt a squeezing sensation well up within it.

I need to protect her!

Lily was the last surviving carbuncle. Shura had died a thousand years ago, but having been given a second chance at life in this era, he wondered if he now existed to protect this girl. The lord of this city, Archdemon Valefor, had taken Lily under her protection, but her close advisors didn't think highly of Lily. This was because Lily had been involved in some sort of wicked deeds in the past, but right now, she had no memories.

Shura knelt by her bedside, took Lily's hand, and said, "Lily. Um... We're fellow carbuncles. I think I can help you escape from here. If your wounds are healed, we can even go tonight."

After saying that, he realized this sounded like he was asking her to elope with him, which turned his cheeks a little red. And yet, after blinking in confusion for a bit, Lily shook her head.

"If you do that, you'll be scolded," she said.

"Who cares about me?! You're..."

"Besides, that would mean betraying Foll. I can't do that."

She put on a troubled smile, which wrenched at Shura's heart even more.

Hngh... What is this feeling?

Well, he knew exactly what that feeling was. He simply hadn't experienced anything of the like a thousand years ago.

I mean, how could I not fall in love?!

After being resurrected a thousand years after his death, he'd been thrown into a hellish battle. And then, as soon as he'd survived that, he'd found out his entire race was extinct. At a complete loss, he'd found a fellow carbuncle on her deathbed—and one who was so pretty too. He couldn't help but believe that this was fate.

However, Shura wasn't even sure how long he would be alive in this era. Thus, he didn't want to make advances on her only to burden her with more tragedy. He didn't even want the girl to know of these serious emotions he harbored, especially only a few days after meeting her. And so, he continued agonizing over this on his own while Lily put a hand to her mouth and smiled slightly.

"He worries so much about me just because we're fellow carbuncles... What a nice person," she whispered to herself.

Alas, Shura's feelings hadn't gotten through to her at all.

The Succubus Princess Can't Even Win in Her Own Castle

"So this is Lilith's hometown, huh? It's super pretty!"

"You know it sounds like sarcasm when you force yourself to say stuff like that, right?"

Lilith's group had come to the succubi's capital. The castle stood before them, but it had an active volcano behind it, so it was always cloudy there. Light only peeked through the clouds a few times a year, so even during the day, bats flew about the dark castle. Lilith was exasperated, but Furas gave her a curious look.

"Huh? I mean, there are glowing flowers blooming all over," he said.

“The noctilucent weeds? Well, it’d be pitch-black out without them.”

“There’s a warm light faintly spilling from all the houses’ windows too.”

“The glass is just cloudy from all the volcanic ash.”

“And above all else, you’re here!”

When he said that without a shadow of a doubt, Lilith was left flustered.

“S-Stop saying such embarrassing things!”

“It’s not embarrassing! Why, you look so pretty in a dress that I can’t even look at you directly, and with this town as a backdrop, you really look like a princess of the night.”

“A-Auugh...”

Seeing that this was her castle, Lilith was wearing a black dress, but she was still shocked at how brazenly he could say such things.

“Furcas. Lilith is troubled, so just, like, leave it at that, yeah?” an ice-cold voice said.

“S-Sorry...” Furcas responded with a start. “Th-That was close...”

Furcas didn’t know what exactly was close about it, but it just felt like he’d been in great danger of being swept away by something.

“Lilith, what are you loitering around the gate so long for? And who is that boy over there?”

“Oh, grandpa. Um, he’s...how do I even put it?”

“Are you Lilith’s grandpa? I’m called Furcas. My big bro, Zagan, has been looking after me, and I’m in love with Lilith.”

How are you so assertive?!

Lilith was left flapping her gums speechlessly as her grandfather looked at Furcas’s right hand.

“Hrm, could that Sigil be...?”

“Huh? Oh, this? Zagan calls it the Sigil of the Archdemon or something,” Furcas answered.

“Hm? An Archdemon? And an active one at that?”

“I wonder... I don’t actually remember my past. My feelings for Lilith are genuine, though,” Furcas said with a beaming smile.

Lilith’s grandfather grabbed Furcas’s hand and exclaimed, “All right! Please take good care of my granddaughter!”

“Leave it to me!”

“Grandpa?!”

The many rare species of Liucaon had always needed strong backing. Lilith knew this, but it felt like she was being sold, so she couldn’t help but let out a heavy sigh.

Even on a Family Trip, There’s Time for a Date

“I heard the Holy City was an amazing place, but it’s not all that different from Kianoides, huh?”

This was Nephteros’s second time in the city, but it was her first on a sightseeing trip. Seeing her mutter like it was a bit of a letdown, Richard smiled in amusement.

“That’s not true,” he answered. “To begin with, the clothes people wear in the streets are different, and brand-name goods are more prominent in the shops. That said, disregarding the heart of the city, they might be pretty similar.”

“Is that so? I’m surprised you can tell. I can’t really see any difference...”

Nephteros squinted and took a look at the other pedestrians, which got a good chuckle out of Richard.

“My job as a lowly underling was to walk around town looking for trivial abnormalities, after all.”

“Is that what underlings are meant to do? Chastille did it quite often, though.”

“She’s, well, a bit of an exception.”

“But I’m happy you went out looking around town like that, you know?”

If he hadn't, Nephteros wouldn't be here today. Richard wasn't so dense a man as to be unaware of that, however. Even as his cheeks reddened slightly, he calmly bowed to her.

After taking a good look around town a little more, Nephteros noticed plenty of small differences. Many of the signboards outside the shops were ones she hadn't seen before.

"I feel like the biggest difference is the smell," she said.

"The smell?"

"Yes. Kianoides smells really dusty, or how to put it... Like there's a big mix of smells from all different kinds of buildings and goods, right? Here, the smell of something akin to perfume is more prominent."

That was probably because many of the pedestrians here favored the use of perfume. As she mulled over such thoughts, Nephteros noticed a scent mixed in that she wasn't familiar with.

"Hm? What kind of store is that, I wonder? Is it food...?"

There was a signboard with a colorful painting of a mound of meat and vegetables between what looked like bread. Beneath it, there was a really long line outside the shop.

"Oh, that's a type of meat sandwich called a sandburger. I haven't seen them in Kianoides yet, but I've heard they're rather popular here."

"Hmm..."

Nephteros did her best to sound disinterested. She hadn't seen it before, and the shop's sign was rather distinct. However, courage was required to join such a long line.

"If you're that curious, would you like to try one?" Richard asked.

"H-How do you know?!"

"It's easy to see..."

Nephteros felt like Richard's eyes were focused on her ears.

"B-But won't we have less time to walk around town if we wait in line?"

“Spending time with you is more than enough for me, Nephteros.”

“Mmm...”

The line moved faster than expected, and they got through it in just a few minutes. What awaited her at the end was bread wrapped up in paper.

“How are you supposed to eat this?” Nephteros asked.

There was no plate or any cutlery. It looked like their only choice was to bring it with them and eat it later, but...

“You just bite into it as it is,” Richard answered. “Look, like that.”

Richard pointed at a young man who was biting into his sandburger like it was an apple.

Huh? I need to do that in front of Richard?

Opening her mouth that wide was far too embarrassing for Nephteros.

“Want to take it back to the inn and eat it there?” Richard asked, smiling knowingly.

“No... I’ll give it a try.”

They’d lined up for it together and everything. Nephteros unwrapped the paper, revealing a cylindrical or even spherical mass. It was terrifyingly thick. Nevertheless, she resolved herself and tried taking a bite.

“Mmm... Oh, it’s tasty.”

The soft bread and fragrant meat were accompanied by crisp leafy vegetables and chewy pickles. She was surprised that anyone had thought of mixing so many things into one food item, but that was exactly what had brought together this strange harmony.

“I’m glad you like it,” Richard said, then took a bite of his own sandburger.

Seeing him do so like it was perfectly ordinary, not even needing to gather any resolve, really gave Nephteros the impression that he was a man. In any case, with how large it was, oil and such spilled from the packaging as she ate, giving her a hard time.

“My hands are all sticky...”

“Oh, do forgive me. That hadn’t come to mind,” Richard said, holding out a handkerchief for her immediately.

“Thanks...”

She could have used sorcery to handle it without dirtying his handkerchief, but Nephteros averted her eyes and accepted it.

There’s no need to rely on sorcery for everything...

“You said this sandburger thing doesn’t exist in Kianoides, right?”

“Indeed.”

“Given a month, I’m sure Zagan will make it really popular over there...”

“Oh... Well, that does sound like the Archdemon.”

That same Archdemon had already circulated tapioca to Kianoides for some reason. Easily picturing this, Richard smiled in amusement as he nodded along.

“In that case, we’ll be able to have some together again,” Nephteros said, feeling her cheeks get hotter.

Richard put his hand to his chest like he’d been struck through it but immediately returned a gentle smile.

“Yes. Of course,” he replied, his smile turning impish. “Now that it’s decided, we must get news of this to the Archdemon as soon as possible.”

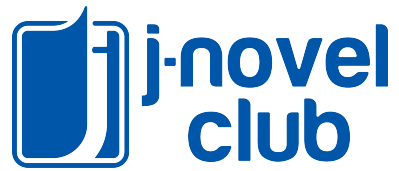
“Is it really all right for an Archangel to rely on an Archdemon?”

“I’m your knight, aren’t I? So long as it pleases you, just a little doesn’t hurt.”

“What a bad knight.”

The two of them burst into laughter.

One month later, sandburgers really did end up being sold in Kianoides.



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by Fuminori Teshima

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